

Carbon Scarred with Ciphers

Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, eds. Frank Bidart & David Gewanter. Faber & Faber, £40, €57.60

Long before this book appeared there was a conceptual—one could even say an epistemological—issue with the *Collected Poems* of Robert Lowell. However falsely, any *Collected Poems* (and especially one by a deceased writer) provides a sense of finality, as it presents a completed achievement, a body of work that may now be scrutinised. But this is precisely the kind of finality and completion that Lowell came to resist in his later understanding of poetry. It is not just that he famously wanted the raw and the immediate rather than the cooked (“words meat-hooked from the living steer”), it was that from the mid-1960s onwards Lowell came to feel that all of his poetry was provisional, malleable, both changeable and needing change. The very existence of the two Notebooks, *History* (1973) and *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973) clearly embodies this sense of the poem as a necessary (even compulsive) accommodation of the aleatory which, if it is to have life, has to change and be open to alteration. “I... have handled my published work as if it were a manuscript”, Lowell wrote of *Notebook* (1970), and he effectively published one book several times, though with telling revisions and re-orderings.

One of the reasons why most critics prefer the Notebooks to *History* is that the Notebooks provide a truer sense of the improvised and the aleatory, whereas for *History* Lowell attempted to impose some structuring order on the material. Thus a fundamental problem with Bidart and Gewanter’s edition is the decision to include only *History*, thereby reducing or eliminating the sense of the immediate the reader had from the Notebooks. Two important issues about the Notebooks and *History* are often overlooked. One is that Lowell was not just rewriting recent poems, but was also rewriting work from much earlier in his career, and

the second is that he did not necessarily think of the later version as a replacement of the earlier one. For example, a version of "Water" appears in *History*, nine years after it was published as the first poem in *For the Union Dead* (1964). The *History* version is a sonnet (at least, it has fourteen lines) and stands as the first in a moving sequence of four poems for Elizabeth Bishop. In *For the Union Dead* the poem is made up of eight grim quatrains, a form that brilliantly mirrors the poem's bleak insistence on how unamenable landscape is to human desire. The point is not simply that Lowell revised already published work. It is that, unlike those other celebrated revisers, Auden and Moore, he thought of the two versions (and there are more, in some cases) as having an equal and simultaneous co-existence. There is eventually no such thing as finally published work for Lowell. It is all open to change, and his comment that he has handled his published work as if it were a manuscript is as much a statement of poetic principle as it is an apology to would-be book buyers. Lowell, as Bishop recognised in her elegiac "North Haven", came to think of the ability to revise as a guarantee of being alive. He saw the open published book as an open coffin, and revision became almost a compulsion. The dictum that poems are never finished, only abandoned, is keenly true for him, but his practice indicates that poems were never even abandoned. In this respect, Lowell's translations are more important than many readers and critics might think. Just as a perfect translation is an impossibility, so too is a finished poem in a final form. The force of this concept is strengthened here in the *Collected*, where the often-overlooked *Imitations* (1961) appears between *Life Studies* (1959) and *For the Union Dead*, to call attention to the changing attitude to poetry that those books traced. In fact, a case can be made for *Imitations* as a pivotal text for Lowell, an essential part of the transitions in his poetry.

All of this means that producing Lowell's *Collected Poems* presents an extraordinary editorial challenge, since such a volume must misrepresent how he thought of his own poetry. Other poets may think of their *Collected Poems* as the summit of their accomplishment; to Lowell it would have been just like another typescript ready, as he put in "End of a Year", to become a "carbon scarred with ciphers". At first glance the case of Whitman and his various editions of *Leaves of Grass* is comparable, since he too handled his published work as if it were a manuscript. But

Whitman did, on his deathbed, prepare for posterity what he knew would be the final version of the *Leaves*. The closest Lowell came to this was the *Selected Poems* of 1976, and even that was far from final in his terms (a revised version was published the following year). Reading the proofs of that *Selected*, Lowell was delighted with a printer's mistake which arranged "Night Sweat" as a twenty-eight line poem rather than the two separated sonnets which appeared earlier in *For the Union Dead*. (The mistake was understandable since in the American edition of *For the Union Dead* the poem is divided over two pages and could easily have been read as if it were meant to be one continuous poem.) For the *Selected*, Lowell chose the accidental twenty-eight line poem, but gave no indication that the earlier version should be changed to match this new arrangement (a point that for any experienced editor makes redundant Bidart's note on why he chose to include the earlier version).

The very existence then of this *Collected Poems* inevitably falsifies Lowell's sense of what poetry was and his own practice as a poet. At the same time, though, the fact that it preserves the integrity of the individual volumes in chronological order provides an unprecedented perspective on Lowell's development. (I was, incidentally, almost pathetically grateful for this sensible ordering of the book; at times during the long, long wait I feared a disaster akin to that of Anthony Thwaite's edition of Philip Larkin's *Collected Poems* with its effacement of the individual volumes' integrity.) When Lowell saw Eliot's *Collected Poems* he commented that it made you realise that all of Eliot's poems were really one poem, the journey of Prufrock from despair to faith. Thus, we are prompted to see a unity of identity and some sort of a journey in this book. Lowell seemed to be a poet always in transition, always anxious about the direction that his work was taking. Yet seeing the books of poems collected here under one cover makes evident his poetry's consistencies rather than its transitions. There is of course the major shift from *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) to *Life Studies*, but the intense religious conviction that drove the earlier poetry persists in the later work where it works as a desire to invoke moral authority when surveying the age. At the same time, this desire is often checked by the poet's knowledge of irreducible complexity and ambiguity of his materials.

His remarkable intensity is another consistent element. Lowell makes so many other modern poets seem slack and trivial. Some

of his poems may seem casual or directionless at first, then they swerve to a conclusion with a killing line or image (sometimes enigmatic, sometimes with a brutal directness) that heightens all that went before. Lowell's intensity marks him as different from, though still closely connected to, the friends who were also his major contemporaries. The graceful, reserved elegance of Bishop's poetry functions as a mask to express obliquely an emotional intensity that may be so strong as to make direct treatment impossible or unbearable. Randall Jarrell developed an apparently casual, informal style which sometimes led intriguingly to a particular and attractive way of considering major concerns—and sometimes just seemed to remain casual and informal. John Berryman's obsessive intensities clustered around the self, and were made to serve his brilliantly handled, often comic, effects. Over the past twenty years the poetic styles of Lowell's contemporaries have been identified and defined. I think, though, that the effects and nature of Lowell's style still need much critical scrutiny, and the publication of this *Collected Poems* will, surely, precipitate this. Of course, our capacity to assimilate and judge the overall achievement of Jarrell, Berryman and Bishop has a great deal to do with the fact that collected or complete editions appeared relatively soon after they died. Jarrell's *Complete Poems* was published in 1968 three years after his death, and Bishop's was published five years after she died. Both of these editions are problematic in some respects, and will need to be revisited by future editors, but they at least served to make the poetry available. Charles Thornbury's entirely admirable edition of Berryman's *Collected Poems* was published in 1989 (Berryman died in 1972), but this gap can be explained by several factors, and Thornbury's conscientious work is unlikely to require revision by a future editor. By contrast, the length of time between Lowell's death in 1977 and the publication of this book has served to obscure Lowell's stature and the poetic journey that he undertook.

When Lowell regarded his own poetic trajectory, he spoke of a movement from ancient Rome and Greece to his own self, and this is precisely the journey that he imposed on the ordering of the Notebooks for *History*. But that is a misleading trajectory, and is in any event complicated by his consistencies, such as the use of Greek mythology as a significant source of analogies for his self and for his age in his last published collection, *Day by Day* (1977).

I see the journey outlined in this edition of the *Collected Poems* as a movement from “there” to “here”, from his consideration of the eternal frozen in time to his intense involvement in the public quotidian (a sort of reverse of Eliot’s journey from Prufrock to *Four Quartets*). “There” is the first word of the first poem in the *Collected Poems*—thanks to an editorial decision that many will consider wrong (i.e., to publish Lowell’s first collection, *Land of Unlikeness* [1944], as an appendix rather than as the first book). *Day by Day* is dominated by a sense of “here”, that is, of the need to accept and understand the imperfection that is ours. Indeed, it is worth reading this *Collected Poems* in sequence in order to see a poet’s developing view of the world. It moves from a poem called “Exile’s Return” towards a one that begins with the lines “We took our paradise here—/ how else love?” and reaches the magnificent “Epilogue” to *Day by Day*, where Lowell endorses the poet’s responsibility to record the “poor passing facts” that we are, the realities of the here and now. *Day by Day*, always a favourite of mine, seems stronger now than ever before, simply because its meanings and self-reflections are intensified when viewed as the accumulation and culmination of all that has gone before in the volume in hand.

Day by Day also clarifies one of the continuities in Lowell’s poetry—his intense and sometimes corrosive self-inquiry. Often this takes the form of nervous anxiety: it is hard to think of any other poet who would look back on a life’s work of highly acclaimed poetry and sum it up with the edgy apologia that is “Epilogue”. Lowell never stopped being anxiously and obsessively self-reflective about his writing and uncertain about his achievements. To some extent this anxiety both causes and is exacerbated by the transitions from book to book, and it also comes to be intimately concerned with his wavering and ambivalent sense of history. It is a commonplace to say that Lowell was both burdened and enriched by his sense of the past. Reading the *Collected Poems*, one distinguishes how sharply and frequently he oscillated between the desire to escape the past’s deadening forces and the need to understand them; for to understand them was to understand his self. Of course, for Lowell as a Bostonian, history was also family history, and some of his poems express the need to betray that legacy (this emerges powerfully in the suggested identification with Hamlet in “Plotted” from *The Dolphin*). As Lowell acknowledged, another Boston Brahmin was a crucial

precursor of this idiom: he thought of *Life Studies* as his version of *The Education of Henry Adams*. He also said that he saw his first books as an attempt to write himself out of historical flux (to be “there”, not “here”). This was a wilfully naïve desire, at a time when he could ignore the paradox that came to haunt him obsessively when he wrote the Notebooks. He realised then that by writing oneself out of history one only embeds oneself in it more firmly. This is why the Notebooks are preferable to *History*. In the Notebooks, history is an inevitable force interwoven with the present, but *History*’s chronological arrangement, and the extraction of the *For Lizzie and Harriet* poems falsely imply a deliberate move towards freedom from the past.

Given the fundamental problem of collecting the poems of a poet who saw all his work as malleable, one might be generous and claim that Bidart’s edition is appropriate (this, for instance, is the view taken by Michael Hofmann in the *London Review of Books*). In fact, it is a ragbag. The body of the book—the poems themselves—is reasonably unproblematic. Apart from *Land of Unlikeness*, the books are pretty much reproduced here in chronological order, and the editors do the housekeeping fairly unfussily. This tidying-up includes giving us the versions of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* that Lowell had approved for publication, ensuring that this *Life Studies*, unlike some others, includes “91 Revere Street” and ends with “Skunk Hour”. Readers will disagree, of course, about the merits of choosing *History* and excluding the Notebooks, but surely many will concede that a choice had to be made for a one-volume *Collected Poems*. The poems themselves, it should also be said, are handsomely reproduced, with a generous font-size and attractive layout; apart from the three sonnet sequences, each poem begins on a new page. Problems arise with the additional material. There are seven appendices, an Afterword in which Bidart reflects on confessional poetry, around 150 pages of notes to the poems, a chronology of Lowell’s life, a selected bibliography and an index of titles. Bizarrely, there is no contents page for the individual poems either at the beginning of the book or within each book section. Nor is there an index of first lines, a fact that seriously undermines the book’s usefulness. I’m surely not alone in remembering many of the poems of *History* more by their first lines and not their titles.

No consistent rule seems to govern the inclusion of the material published in the appendices. There are five magazine versions

of poems but no indication as to why these were selected and not alternative versions of other poems. There are two sequences from *Notebook*—a total of eighteen poems—that serve mainly to whet the appetite for more. Again, I could find no editorial reason for the selection of these sequences and not others. I am not complaining about the uncollected material included in the appendices (I fondly imagined that the inclusion of stray material was one of the functions of a *Collected Poems*). Besides I was delighted to have these poems, particularly Lowell's version of Akhmatova's "Requiem", and, in the section entitled "Last Poems", the unforgettable "Summer Tides", which until now I'd only seen published in Ian Hamilton's biography (1983). The prose appendices are far less compelling. I could understand the inclusion of Lowell's "After Enjoying Six or Seven Essays on Me" as a kind of introduction to the *Collected Poems*, but as an appendix it looks marginal, as though chosen because it was inadvertently omitted from the *Collected Prose* (1987). Bidart's little essay on confessional poetry is pointless as it raises a ghost long since laid to rest. The notes seem to me excessive and in some respects redundant. Some annotation is obviously needed, and such a book should have notes regarding copy-text, variant readings and (generously supplied here) some alternative drafts of poems. But many of these notes just provide information available in standard reference works, and some of them are misleading (according to the notes, the Fens are located in "North East England"). The other problem with annotating like this is that future editions of the *Collected Poems* will require new notes, as what is now considered common knowledge will become less well known. Similarly the bibliography may be useful now but it will be dated in five years' time. Is the plan then to keep updating the book? A nicely appropriate gesture, if so, and one that could make Lowell's *Collected Poems* as malleable as he might have wished.

The fact is that this volume falls uneasily between two kinds of *Collected Poems*, with the result that it fully satisfies the needs of neither the general reader nor the scholar. It is not condensed enough to be attractive, affordable or portable for undergraduates or readers in general, and yet the editorial apparatus seems to be aimed at the general reader and not the scholar. The obvious solution was to publish two editions: a single volume with the poems alone, perhaps lightly annotated, and a multi-volume scholarly edition, including the Notebooks and *History* and a

proper editorial apparatus. (Both should have a table of contents and an index of first lines and titles.) There are many examples of this practice, one of the most recent being the two versions of Robert Graves's *Collected Poems* (the three-volume annotated edition [1995-99] and the handsome one-volume edition [2000] that, even at just under 900 pages, was issued in 2003 as a Penguin paperback). I have no doubt that Lowell would have been better served by following this practice. The fact that almost everyone I've talked to about the book, and most of the reviews I've read, are discussing the edition rather than the poetry lends this *Collected Poems* an unfortunate cast.