

Robert Lowell's *Collected Poems*

JOHN MCAULIFFE

At the packed London launch of his *Collected Poems* this July, the case for Robert Lowell was put by Michael Hofmann, David Gewanter, Lord Grey Gowrie and Mark Ford. Each read four poems and spoke briefly about Lowell's life or influence. Hofmann, who edited a 100-page Lowell for Faber & Faber two years ago, read "Mouth of the Hudson" as an example of the kind of atypical poem which, he regretted, Lowell wrote as a one-off and, then, as a (poor!) illustration of his humour, he read "Sheikh with a Hundred Wives". Grey Gowrie read "Waking in the Blue", Lowell's version of Rilke's "Pigeons", and weirdly, "Churchill 1970 Retrospective", of which Gowrie had written the original draft and which Lowell had then (Factory-style) polished up and published first in *Notebook* and then *History*. David Gewanter spoke of Seamus Heaney as an inheritor and defender of Lowell, and read samples of his epoch-making style, including "Memories of West Street and Lepke", and Mark Ford concluded by reading some of Lowell's poems about Elizabeth Bishop and John Berryman.

The concerted readings of Lowell as a humorist, as friend of Bishop, as a poet who wrote about political controversies obviously say as much about how poetry is read now as about Lowell's work. Equally, the way the readers shied away from the family poems, the poems of lineage, and the pre-*Life Studies* books, showed up perhaps how Lowell might be best served by a selection like Hofmann's rather than this enormous *Collected*. Lowell's defining qualities, as I see them, the unsettling adjectives that jam the lines, the abrupt line-breaks, grotesque conjunctions, the irruption of a despicable "I" to provide a crunching dramatic focus ("I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil" or "I myself am hell" or "I am frizzled, stale and small" or "My eyes have seen what my hand did") often seem too heavily deliberate and scaf-

fold-like even in Hofmann's short selection. Browsing through the *Collected* made me realise, more than anything, the relief with which John Ashbery's first readers must have reacted to his slippery mixture of anger and comedy and lyricism.

MICHAEL HINDS

So the slab of Lowell's *Collected Poems* has now become something to be complained about in actuality rather than apprehension, with half of its poems sucked into an over-narrow gutter on the right-hand page. As for Lowell himself, he remains unmoved by the entire experience. He is still a compelling figure, the single American poet that you might choose to expound upon the nation's history (literary and otherwise), but at the same time his extraordinary poems seem fewer than ever before. For all the editorial scruple and toil that the late work has demanded, it is significant that the vast majority of reviewers have immediately cited "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" as evidencing his genius most aptly. That poem was key to undergraduate consciousness-formation when I was a student, and it should remain so. Indeed, Lowell is a poet of twentieth-century adolescence without equal. As for the laconic poems from *Life Studies*, decades of increasingly ragged and tedious imitations have diminished their impact. Furthermore, the desensitised machismo of Lowell's persona, along with the coercive arrangement of the volume, seems particularly alienating now. Having said that, I must admit that "Beyond the Alps" is one of the poems of the century in all of its versions, and it is my all-time favourite opening poem of a volume. Contrary to all of Lowell's protestations about absorbing Williams and Ginsberg, it is the rhetorically triple-knotted "To Speak of the Woe That Is in Marriage" which also endures in my mind, as have many of the poems in which Lowell attempts to speak from his idea of female perspective. Whatever. The *Collected* proves that the crazed rhetorician of the early work is a more compelling poet (unsurprisingly) than the secretary of conflicted ethics that Lowell became in the later volumes. Poetically, it is shocking to realise that Lowell is most memorable as a more intelligent and rigorous version of Dylan Thomas, but it is inescapable. Politically, the pacifist/refusenik/anti-Communist of World War II and the 1950s is obviously a more interesting and controversial figure than the paradoxically statesmanlike and serene anti-Vietnam protestor of the 1960s, and that earlier incar-

nation also made more credible poetry. Lowell is remarkable for his apprehension of violence but also his use of it, his early sense of poetic structure carrying with it an aristocratic force of predestination. The Cape Codology of the dolphinophile in his dotage is easily dismissed, but as an awesome and pitiable formalist Caligula, Lowell still terrifies.

SEÁN LYSAGHT

I was first introduced to Robert Lowell's poetry when a second year student at UCD in 1976: we were given "Mr Edwards and the Spider" as an exercise for analysis in a practical criticism class. With Denis Donoghue in charge of the English Department at the time, this poem arrived on our desks with a kind of lofty authority. Lowell had the density, and it seemed in this poem, the religious engagement of the Metaphysicals, then very much in vogue. It came as a surprise to me not long after to discover the very different poetry in the *Selected Poems* of 1965, including the extraordinary cadences of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket". There was, first of all, an Atlantic geography in the latter poem that had a peculiar excitement for someone reared at the edge of that same windblown space. The close-up autobiographical and confessional pieces from *Life Studies* struck an entirely different chord, however. In those days we arts students were politically very left wing and therefore anti-American. I found it perversely gratifying to witness the respectable world of New England falling apart in the person of Robert Lowell. With Donoghue, the "sovereign ghost" of the department, American academic authority loomed large, but here was a poet subverting all the bourgeois decencies of the Ivy League world. As the poet himself exclaims in "During Fever": "Terrible that old life of decency/ without unseemly intimacy/ or quarrels". Unseemly intimacy and quarrels were part of the vitality of our own student lives at that time.

Lowell also seemed to match the songwriters with his irreverence, his apparent casualness, and the appeal of his local references. To someone whose ears were full of Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, it was exciting to read how Lowell "yampered metaphysics with Abramowitz" or how he "outdrank the Rahvs in the heat/ of Greenwich Village". There was a kinetic force in the poetry to match Jack Kerouac's joyrider prose in *On the Road*. The lines had the swagger of rock lyrics and, to my mind then, Lowell

would not have been out of place reciting on the stage at Woodstock.

All this, of course, was a very partial view of the helpless figure Lowell eventually became, kept going by the munificence and forbearance of the academic establishment. I subsequently felt a professional duty to tackle the European translations and versions, and the later sonnets, but none of this material had the impact of the poems in that earlier *Selected*, with their centre of gravity in the "Life Studies" sequence. In the later poems of that selection, especially the poems of mental and marital breakdown, Lowell's lyric voice is still somehow sustained by the memorial presences of his ancestors; they keep him company in his delirium, and they allow the reader to feel that, despite its solitary neurosis, the voice is anchored in a wider predicament.

PETER DENMAN

A "collected" should allow us to see the individual works and collections in the context of the development—or deterioration—of a career's overall span. The four magisterial collections—*Life Studies*, *Imitations* (yes, *Imitations* is integral to the curve of his career), *For the Union Dead*, and *Near the Ocean*—used to sit slimly on a shelf; but now suddenly we see Lowell's work bulk large across a thousand pages, forcing a reassessment. However, the decision to omit *Notebook* tidies away the sprawl of the later output; there is a point at which editing becomes distortion. The shifting and unstable nature of Lowell's later poetry meant that it became a continual work-in-progress, written to the moment and hesitating between revision and abandonment. The very process of editing runs against its grain. I'd have preferred a book giving a plain text of all the poems, perhaps with some transcriptions of representative poems in their various states, as can be found here among the notes.

And the notes themselves? Too many of them give information easily found in an encyclopædia. Others are intrinsically unnecessary: "Great Aunt Sarah" was a great-aunt—enough said. Nothing is added by learning that she was "the sister of Lowell's grandfather, Arthur Winslow". The complexity of reference and allusion in these poems could never be covered fully. For years I read "Man and Wife" and its opening phrase "Tamed by Miltown..." without knowing that Miltown was a tranquilliser. When eventually I learned the meaning I was gratified, but did not feel that the

poem had been passing me by entirely in the interim. *Notebook* would have been preferable to the notes. But they almost earn their place for the irrelevant but delightful titbit glossing the Tudor Ford in "Skunk Hour": "A two-door sedan (Ford named the four-door model the Fordor)". A glimpse of what Marianne Moore was up against.

DAVID WHEATLEY

Let's agree that a pummelling round the ears with "Waking Early Sunday Morning", "Sailing Home from Rapallo" or "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" is not something a young reader easily gets over. Let's agree too that Robert Lowell is one of the very few modern poets who can produce that kind of effect, not once, but over and over. Let's even imagine that his rewards for doing so place him somewhere as near the top of the twentieth-century tree as he felt he belonged. But... there's a "but". I knew Jonathan Galassi had something to do with it, this insidious feeling creeping over me as I made my way through the second half of *Collected Poems*. Then I saw Frank Bidart and David Gewanter's description of the notes to his Montale *Collected* as "our model and our despair", and realised: if I was ever going to stomach the worst excesses of *History, For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin* it could only be by having them translated into Italian by Montale then retranslated into English by Jonathan Galassi. With as much of Lowell himself left out as possible, in other words. I wanted, really wanted not to be a Sunday driver Lowellite who couldn't get past *Near the Ocean*, but coming across a line like "Flipping the Sundays for notice of my new book" I can't help myself: this is bloated, self-medicating "seedy grandiloquence" and "bullshit eloquence" of the first order. And it's not just the egotism of it all I can't stand—Lowell's personal vanity I can live with—it's the poems' monumentalist ethos, even at their most throwaway, their certainty of their status as daily memos to the Western Canon, their constant gloaming Stockholm-wards over their shoulder.

"At least my poems are finished", Lowell growled to the audience after Frank O'Hara tried out "Lana Turner has collapsed!" at a reading that most unlikely pair gave in 1962, O'Hara having just written it on the Staten Island Ferry. *Collected Poems* would be a vastly improved book if Lowell could have spent the journey tossing the logomaniac narcissist inside him overboard. So—how tame and conventional of me—it looks like I'll be sticking with

Near the Ocean after all. Or now that I mention him, O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* instead: "I have been to lots of parties/ and acted perfectly disgraceful/ but I never actually collapsed/ oh Lana Turner we love you get up".

DENNIS O'DRISCOLL

It was as an affronted twenty-year old in 1974 that I read Jonathan Raban's edition of Robert Lowell's poetry, which contained extensive notes on the poems. I preferred to puzzle out Lowell's poems for myself without any suggestion that the "answers" could be checked at the back of the book. I wanted *Life Studies* and not Lowell Studies. I wanted to avoid authorised readings that would limit my own interpretations of the author's words.

Michael Hofmann—whose compelling poetry proves that there is poetic life after *Life Studies* and that "imitations" are a confirmation of legacy as well as a form of flattery—wrote in his review of John Berryman's *Collected Poems*: "The *Collected Poems* of a modern poet should not have an academic turnstile in front of them... The more nearly invisible an editor makes himself in such an undertaking, the better". Words for every editor—academic or lay—to heed when pondering the lesson of Lowell's severely belated *Collected Poems*, which has accumulated so many notes of marginal value that there is, ironically, no room for the poet's own *Notebook*.

May we return to first principles with *Collecteds*, before editors begin to eclipse poets, as theatre directors upstage playwrights? When a poet dies, the best possible memorial—unless some contrary instructions were clearly and unambiguously left—is a prompt and accurate edition of all of the poems to which that poet lent his or her imprimatur (the mainstream collections in most cases). The *Collected Poems* of a major poet should not be treated as a kind of anchor-store, the opening of which is to be delayed indefinitely while a shopping-mall of satellite businesses is under construction; the notes and commentaries can be built up separately and gradually and optionally. Far better that your literary executor be an eagle-eyed proof-reader than a magpie annotator. Poets, take note.

EVAN RAIL

To me, what was most interesting about the appearance of the *Collected Poems* was the strange amount of attention it received, especially in the mainstream media. Within a few weeks of the

release, reviews and profiles sprouted up in the Sunday magazine section of the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Atlantic*, among many others. Lengthy articles about Lowell also came out in venues that traditionally give very short shrift to poets and poetry, like the *Economist*. For a subject that is almost invariably ignored—unless it concerns the \$100-million bequest of an heiress—the sudden spotlight was shocking.

All in all it had the feel of a cinematic release, as if Robert Lowell were a beloved old movie star, rather than one of the best American poets of the twentieth century. Strangely, some of the magazines treated the publication very much like another Hollywood blockbuster: in the on-line magazine *Slate*, *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott wrote an appreciation subtitled “Why Robert Lowell is America’s most important career poet.” And in the *New Yorker*, film critic Anthony Lane spent ten pages covering Robert Lowell’s life and art before moving on to a review of the animated film *Finding Nemo*.