

Reviews

## His Arcadia, How Hard It Came To Him

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*The Letters of Robert Lowell*. 2005. Ed. Saskia Hamilton. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 849 pp. + xxxi. Illus.

**FROM** his fourth collection of poems *Life Studies* (1959) onward, Robert Lowell was thought of as a boldly confessional poet, blatantly revealed in his poems. But poems are unified objects, made and held together often by personae and aesthetic masks. The over seven hundred letters editor Saskia Hamilton selects for this volume (she hopes eventually the complete letters will be published in a multivolume work) point up how distant still is the confessional poem from the complex truths of a lived life.

Lowell was a ceaseless reviser of his poems. In his hands the letter, then, is a particularly interesting form. Here he is able to release each sentence from his exacting demands. Resisting with all manner of apology any revision (“Monday I’ll write again like a writer”), he allows an often tense interplay of opposites—he says and unsays within a single sentence (230). “How evil and world-worn I feel for a moment—no, not really,” he writes, “Spring has come here and I’m thinking of fishing” (92). This gives a push-

pull feel to the prose, not exactly contradictory but displaying the compelling emotional range Lowell opens to phrase by phrase.

The results are well wrought still and certainly far from sloppy; Lowell remains aware of every move. “My paragraph begins and ends on the same word,” he observes (89). His habitual apologies seem sincere; they do not feel coy or falsely modest:

I suspect this is a silly letter, but I can’t re-read it. (122)

You can see I haven’t tried very hard so far in the letter for order and clarity. (125)

Let me get this scrappy, whistling little letter into the afternoon mail. (352)

P.S. I see I’ve said little. (152)

They may be less about the writing than about Lowell’s own stern New England corrective, so uncomfortable is he about an epistolary mode he finds at times both freeing and pleasurable.

One expects—reading a writer’s collection of letters—to be sent in interesting ways back to the work. What is unexpected here is that, like good criticism, these letters send the reader back with renewed energy to the demanding works of modernism: Pound’s *Cantos* and William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*, for example. Lowell is like an enthusiastic ambassador: his perceptive snap, the clarity of his readings, the detailing of his esteem are potent motivators.

It seems to me that maturity of experience makes Williams so wonderful.... Only a man past fifty who knew his town and its people long and inside out could have written *Paterson*.

The description of the water coming down in Part One is a dazzling handling of motion. ‘Gallant,’ an unexpected and yet startling word, with a quiet jerk to it (in its context) that shows Williams as a master of language. Eliot (in the *Quartets*, but always) and Williams seem to me almost infallible in their use of words—the spoken, the conventional, the technical, the flat the intense etc. (96)

Because Lowell was a prodigious reader—“I’ve become a pure creature of books” (204)—many of the letters are not lilting descriptive cadenzas like Elizabeth Bishop’s letters but rigorous, intense Beethoven-like chords, ideas

phrased with striking confidence and hard-won from a list of books he may detail. (Thankfully Hamilton includes an exhaustive set of notes.) To his friend Peter Taylor in the throes of religious soul-searching, the twenty-five-year-old Lowell writes to offer this help:

I'll list six or seven different categories and one book per category. Other titles by the same authors will do well enough. 1) History Christopher Dawson *Progress and Religion*. 2) Psychology Rudolf Allers *The Psychology of Character*. 3) History of Philosophy Etienne Gilson *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. 4) Polemic Jacques Maritain *Three Reformers*. 5) Basic Philosophy Garrigou-Lagrange *God, [His] Existence and Nature*. 6) Autobiography St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*. If you want sheer information on St. Anne, the Mass, or Purgatory go to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* which is dry, compact and exhaustive. (34)

The heft of Lowell's intellect doesn't mean there aren't beautifully distilled moments. Of Florence he writes, "if you are at all absent-minded or drowsy, it seems like America—a slightly older America [...]. At five in the morning the stones are alive with hundreds of scraping cart sounds—like blue crabs in a tub" (164). And Lowell often exhibits the fiction writer's sharp flair—like Austen, Wharton, or Henry James—for capturing at a wry angle social intricacies:

Incredible dinner at the Eberharts [...]. Allen [Tate] very tight gave two identical very formal toasts to the memory of Ted Spencer, and Auden helpfully took out all our plates, still unfinished, to the pantry, and Katherine Anne announced that she was seventy. (378)

Sat in back of the Trumans at the symphony. They never stirred. Next to them Admiral Nimitz and his daughters smiling, craning around, saying *this is it* (when the Tchaikovsky came on) then—having ignored each other thru the music and a long intermission—the Trumans and Nimitzes suddenly recognized and shook hands with unnecessary heartiness. (77)

Lowell's studious thoroughness across the disciplines amazes at every turn. To John Berryman he writes in 1954, "We [Lowell and wife Elizabeth Hardwick] are doing the Schubert lieder with text-books, scores and conversation" (241). Or he notes to Ezra Pound: "I have just been through, slowly and mostly in French, Flaubert's *Education* with a Guide Bleu map of Paris" (260). One gets the sense from the range and depth of his reading that he seems almost literally to be feeding a furnace.

As the letters proceed, the reader becomes more and more aware of the anguish Lowell's manic-depressive illness incessantly presents him with. His reading seems a kind of reactive search for mastery, as though somehow the intellect—more and wider learning—could clarify emotional chaos, assuage ignorance and confusion in the face of inexplicable mental pressures. Recall that most of the years of Lowell's illness fell during the era before lithium and mood stabilizers when the disease was understood as a psychological rather than a physiological flaw, the treatment protocol then being intense psychotherapy, electric shock and heavy sedation. “[N]o doubt I would be immune, if I had a different soul,” he notes (442).

The letters are also record of Lowell's attempts to bring into language the vicissitudes of the manic-depressive struggle, what he terms the “imbecilic, inhuman, dangerous, embarrassing” (239). The early letters are veiled about this experience. His descriptions grow ever more candid and heartbreaking: “the peculiarity I seem to have been born with is a character made up of stiffness and disorder, or lethargy and passion. These words are not necessarily the best. The two horses, judgment and emotion perhaps, take many names; but they go together but ill at best, and at bad times, one is lying down immobile, the other galloping” (167). “The whole business,” he concludes, “was a pathological mirage, a magical orange grove in a nightmare” (239). Puzzling, on this subject, is editor Hamilton's apparatus in the endnotes. She seems compelled to flag, in what seem often to be arbitrary ways, certain of Lowell's letters which were “Possibly written while mildly manic” or “Probably written while mildly manic” (694–97, 702–04, and elsewhere). This is a fruitless guessing game. It is factually clear which letters are written in hospital during acute manic episodes. Given what is now known about bipolar disorder—hypomanic and mixed states, rapid cycles along the complex bipolar continuum—it seems nearly impossible to pin down such nuances. A letter may well start in one state and change fleetingly later in the day to another. Establishing the precise periods of Lowell's manias and depressions is best left to a biographer. Ms. Hamilton's decision to try to tie his letters to what she guesses is his psychological state raises a whole thorny set of problems and inconsistencies related to issues of “madness and creativity,” problems she cannot address in this format.

What the letters do make clear, for those wanting to understand, are Lowell's thoughts on rhyme, meter, free verse, and his own moves between these. In an age ever more dominated by free verse, he remained committed to the possibilities of rhyme and meter, using them not stodgily but to add distinctive muscularity to his poems. When he first loosens his belt into the

freer verse of *Life Studies*, he writes “my old stuff seemed like something from the ancient extinct age of the reptiles, cumbersome creatures, bogged down and destroyed by their protective hide” (354). “Now that I’ve joined you in unscanned verse,” he quips to William Carlos Williams, “I am struck by how often the classics get boxed up in their machinery” (314). Lowell sees the mixing in of “loose and free meters” as a way to “get the accuracy, naturalness, and multiplicity of prose, yet, I also want the state and surge of the old verse, the carpentry of definite meter that tells me when to stop rambling” (293). The letters show well this fairly constant back and forth between Lowell’s feeling meter and rhyme as constraints or obstacles versus believing they (rhyme, in particular) bring “joy and colour” to the poem (172).

Lowell’s literary ambitions are boldly visible from the volume’s first letter. At age nineteen he writes the literary giant Ezra Pound to request a poetic apprenticeship. All youthful ego and hubris, he explains, “At college I have yearned after iron and have been choked with cobwebs” (4). Chaucer and Shakespeare are his immodest models of what he would desire. In later comments on Emerson, one senses Lowell’s own personal goal (and perhaps, he thinks, the only proper goal for the true American writer): “For Emerson not only spoke America’s mind, he emerged like a whale adding something that wasn’t there, and never would have been there if Emerson had never lived” (225). He, however, is keenly aware of the contemporary landscape. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg somewhat dismissive of the beats—“your wave of people”—Lowell sums up the literary terrain: “The times are bad? But not as bad as you think. 10,000 noodles to one competent writer; 10,000 competent writers to one interesting writer; 10,000 interesting, honest writers to one inspired writer; 100 inspired writers to one of great moment” (345). Greatness can, in his view, be achieved.

Lowell’s own achievements led him in 1947 to Washington and an appointment as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, now known as the post of Poet Laureate. With the spectacle of the capitol and the “spider’s web of unreality” that is politics as his backdrop, Lowell’s ambition to write poems that “set a river on fire” joins with—becomes, too—the pursuit of an “heroic moral energy” (684, 115, 487). Here, also, is the start of some of his most affecting and important correspondence, sustaining and thought-provoking exchanges with Ezra Pound and the philosopher George Santayana. These letters feel crucial and formative.

Lowell had been a conscientious objector in 1943. His letters from Washington onward show a maturing political view, his growing sense of

responsible citizenship in the imperiled years from WWII through the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassinations, the Civil Rights Bill to Vietnam. He appeared on the campaign trail for Eugene McCarthy, for example. After an evening at the White House in May of 1962, Lowell writes to Edmund Wilson: “Except for you, everyone there seemed addled with adulation at having been invited. It was all good fun but next morning you read that the President has sent the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet to Laos, or he might have invaded Cuba again—not that he will, but I feel we intellectuals play a very pompous and frivolous role—we should be windows, not window-dressing” (409).

Hamilton’s well-chosen selection shows ably the full arc of a life presciently described by words Lowell himself used in 1950 to describe Ezra Pound: “his arcadia, how hard it came to him” (153). As the letters mount up, Lowell is increasingly affected by the world’s precariousness. This ongoing and palpable fear reveals itself as a running-out-of-time generosity along with loose outpourings of love, reverence, and intimacy. To Robert Frost in all earnestness he writes, “Your friendship and refreshing bigness have been a treasure to me now for more than twenty years” (325); to Williams, “You are pouring out, and I know I shall be hearing your voice speaking the words to some inner ear in me, for as long...for as long as I journey myself” (250). Upon T. S. Eliot’s death he shares these words with Valerie Eliot: “I heard about it and for weeks caught myself rather inanely saying ‘This is sheer loss, without recompense.’ Sheer loss for us. I have reached an age when all my elders are disappearing, and can’t reconcile myself to the fact. Their wit and guidance are irreplaceable, and each year one seems to withdraw further from the friendly shadow and walk in the noonday glare” (457). His letters to Elizabeth Bishop are without doubt the richest in friendship and devotion here; they tenderly convey how indispensable she was to him both artistically and personally.

Last night I had a dream. I was in France. Paris was again falling to the Germans, but it had become such a habit that one had to look closely to see that anyone really cared. I arrived in Paris [...] went to a party, where I was surrounded by acquaintances. They became distant and shadowy when I approached them. Suddenly I saw you and gave you a tremendous hug. You moved to another table. I said: “I know where there are a couple of good French restaurants.” You said: “They’re all French here.” You see. You must come back. (199)

He reserved his constant awe for her work: “What I mean to say is that this last poem and your long wonderful Nova Scotia story both give themselves,

as though you weren't writing at all, but just talking in a full noisy room, talking until suddenly everyone is quiet" (250). The letters to Bishop suggest, as well, the constant demands placed on her as confidante, the one absorbing the fate of "this strange, almost mythical two-engined machine, one running to doom and the other to salvation," as Lowell's second wife Elizabeth Hardwick described him (xvii).

Lowell's was a life punctuated by the highest literary ideals and by lonely devastation. The poet Robert Hass (1984), giving a close reading of Lowell's poem "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," observes how relentlessly the poem enacts its rises and breaks (14). These letters reveal a life lived out by that same pattern.

### Work Cited

Hass, Robert. 1984. *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. New York: The Ecco Press.