

Introduction
Robert Lowell in Context

What we know of other people
Is only the memory of the moments
During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.
To pretend that they and we are the same
Is a useful and convenient social convention
Which must sometimes be broken. We must also remember
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.

T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (1949)

More than one hundred years have passed since Robert Lowell's birth in 1917. For today's readers, the period of time in which Lowell was active – the middle portion of the twentieth century – is increasingly remote. Concepts like "Cold War," "Vietnam," or "Watergate" get their respective paragraphs in the history books, while figures like Robert Kennedy or Eugene McCarthy are increasingly known only to specialists. That Boston once had a quasi-aristocratic class may be amusing now. Concepts of race and gender were challenged politically and institutionally in Lowell's lifetime but have now become ingredients of an active and controversial discourse of constant self-positioning. All these matters are relevant to a contextually informed reading of Robert Lowell's poetry. Lowell, more than most poets of his time, was steeped in historical consciousness precisely because he came from one of the privileged, Boston "Brahmin" families. His solid anchoring in New England traditions notwithstanding, Lowell often gave the impression of being adrift. As a college student, he was in search of a place that was not Harvard to complete his education, in search of a religion that was not that of his parents, in search of a South that was alien to a New Englander. He remained in search of his proper poetic voice at different times in his productive life and discovered or developed its changing iterations from the 1940s through the 1950s to the 1960s, ranging from a baroque neo-modernism via a conversational "confessional" voice to a nearly epigrammatic sonnet shorthand. But

Lowell was never adrift in his sense of history; here, the markers were clear and the demands that national and family history made on him were obvious. Today's readers will benefit from a certain degree of elucidation as they encounter Lowell's work with its manifold resonances in history and culture. In the light of a few markers properly placed, Lowell makes sense, and his continuing presence in the poetry of our day invites us to challenge our own orthodoxies.

As we reencounter Lowell, we are meeting "a stranger," as T. S. Eliot's "Unidentified Guest" in *The Cocktail Party* phrases it. The task of reintroducing and contextualizing texts and authors is central to the work of literary historians. Cambridge University Press's Literature in Context series, focused on individual authors, favors a traditional approach, one that considers even such a mutable author as Lowell as an integral person whose changes in poetic style, temperament, health, political consciousness, religious affiliation and artistic preferences can be seen as manifestations of a single, coherent consciousness. Contextualizing this "stranger" necessarily takes place on two historical planes, that of the object of study and that of the literary historian's present moment. When we contextualize Robert Lowell, we seek to understand his moment in time based on whatever (new) information we have, and we read him simultaneously in our own moment with its present preoccupations. Writers who are no longer reconsidered drop from memory. The writers we reconsider for our moment are either representative of their own moment in history – we consider William Wordsworth an exemplary Romantic and Virginia Woolf an exemplary modernist, for example – or they speak with particular eloquence to our time. Lowell has continued to fascinate scholars, and he has continued to prompt poets to react to his work, often critically.

We cannot relive the past historical moment, but we can illuminate it with new insights, focusing on key aspects which help us understand. Lowell has been the object of scholarly attention, waxing and waning, ever since his death in 1977. Within the past decade, particularly consequential reinterpretations of his life and work have been made possible by three ventures that have taken readers in new directions: Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire* (2017); *The Dolphin Letters, 1970–1979* (2019) and the auxiliary volume *The Dolphin: Two Versions, 1972–1973* (2019), both edited by Saskia Hamilton; and *Memoirs* (2022), edited by Steven Gould Axelrod and Grzegorz Kość. Jamison provides a new kind of biography, written by a medical doctor who is also a writer and an autobiographer, that puts Lowell's bipolar disease at its center and integrates the disease into his creative work rather than relegating it to a

strange and ill-understood margin. Hamilton's edition of the *Dolphin* letters, which Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick exchanged during and after the breakup of their marriage and divorce, is revelatory and intimate at once. The letters bring private secrets to light and reveal smart, caring, creative people struggling with the demands of daily life and with each other over small slices of happiness, real or imagined, and above all with the question of how artists assess responsibility. Lowell's *Memoirs* appeared as the present volume was going to press, and the editors kindly shared segments of Lowell's writings with those contributors who otherwise would have had to rely on Robert Giroux's 1987 edition of Lowell's *Collected Prose*, now largely superseded. The *Memoirs* are, if anything, even more intimate than *The Dolphin Letters*, in that they are unfiltered "examinations of conscience," as even a lapsed Catholic like Lowell might classify them. From previously unpublished texts such as "My Autobiography," readers can now glean contextual information about the decline of the "Brahmin" culture and the continuing workings of its social conventions and prejudices in Lowell's youth. Furthermore, readers can now see for the first time how Lowell's autobiographical essays furnished not just the material but even the very words that would be turned into section IV of *Life Studies*, his most characteristic volume.

Overview of the Book

Part I, **Places**, situates Lowell in the context of the physical, sociopolitical, and intellectual landscapes that shaped him. Downtown Boston's Beacon Hill and Back Bay neighborhoods were the early and strongest determinants of his geo-identity and geo-poetics. The American South provided him with a complex mindset that gave form and nuance to his animus about his home region. In the early 1960s, New York City would become Lowell's intellectual center, placing him in the vortex of America's cultural and political life. The poet spent the final near-decade of his life in England (and Ireland), starting a family for the second time around and living in a rambling country house while wondering about the passage of time: "Age is our reconciliation with dullness" (*CP* 689).

No American poet of the twentieth century was more absorbed in history and its reverberations in contemporary politics than Lowell. Part II, **American Politics, American Wars**, unites three essays that chronicle Lowell's proximity to history and politics even though he was neither a historian nor a politician. His history was the 1973 *History*, itself an expansive development of his *Notebooks* assembled in the heady days of

1967 to 1969, when civil rights discourse, assassinations, and societal upheaval unsettled America. Both war and the presidency – traditionally opportunities to serve the public good – preoccupied Lowell. Fascinated with toy soldiers as a child, reminiscing about the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, writing to President Roosevelt to justify his conscientious objection to serving in World War II, tangling with President Johnson, and “advising” Eugene McCarthy in his failed run for the presidency, Lowell both shouldered the burden of his New England heritage and displayed it as his poetic patrimony. In his modified sonnets in what would eventually become *History*, Lowell engaged literarily – and often mercilessly – with politicians and historically relevant figures in sharp judgment. This section concludes with a chapter that finds in Robert Lowell’s Cold War poems rich expressions of the modern political subject anxious about nuclear annihilation. These expressions are useful today to construe contemporary political subjectivity fretting about the looming ecological catastrophe.

Part III, **Some Literary Models**, provides selected echoes – in a different key – of the essays on politics and war that precede it. Lowell constructed his intellectual geography from the canonical texts of English and world literature, including the Classics he studied at Kenyon College, and from contact with those writers of his time who could give him access to the sources and the thinkers he sought out for sustenance. His Southern mentors were Classicists, and his political skepticism and dark religious vision of American history found analogues in the dark romanticism of Hawthorne and Melville. Both Melville’s war poems and his narrative *Benito Cereno*, that Lowell would turn into a play, help illuminate Lowell’s “Americanness” and, measured by today’s standards, his limitations in engaging the question of racial dignity and justice. How to express these warring sentiments? From the Jeremiad to the sonnet – transformed into an instrument of surgical scrutiny – Lowell struggled with lyrical form through the four decades of his poetic production. Meg Tyler offers the term “Plaints” to evoke Lowell’s characteristic mode and mood of writing.

Part IV, **Contemporaries: Modernists and Beyond**, traces the literary sources that Lowell sought out and that emerged as formative in his lifetime. As a nineteen-year-old in 1936, he wrote to Ezra Pound, asking for help and mentorship. Largely free from financial pressure to work due to a trust fund, Lowell had the time and the resources to cultivate friendships with the leading intellectuals and writers of his time. Some of the long-established modernists, like Pound and Eliot, turned out to be especially formative for him in the 1940s. Others, especially Elizabeth Bishop and John Berryman, emerge as particularly long-lasting influences.

Together, these fellow writers establish a collective framework and construct the background against which we can see Lowell as a character on their shared stage. Lowell's literary inheritance from Allen Tate via William Carlos Williams to *Life Studies* is well known and still valid, but needs to be supplemented with other narratives, of which the persistent influence of Robert Penn Warren and Randall Jarrell is perhaps the most significant and least appreciated one so far. A chapter about Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell's greatest and longest-lasting literary friendship, completes the section.

Part V, **Life, Illness, and the Arts**, addresses features of Lowell's life and art that no other poet of his time appears to have experienced in quite this combination or quite the same way. Lowell's early conversion to Catholicism remains enigmatic but continued to leave visible traces in his work and his temperament. Distinguishing between religion, faith, and denominational identity in postwar America turns out to be significant. An essay on marriage and its central importance for Lowell opens up new perspectives. Lowell's recurring illness, his bipolar disorder, had not found the appropriate representation in earlier scholarship until Kay Redfield Jamison published *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire* in 2017. Scholars relying on Jamison now reconsider Lowell's poetry written in the penumbra of his illness not as deficient, but as defined in some measure through a quasi-heroic struggle with illness, especially now that the influence of the then newly approved lithium therapy can be traced in his work from the mid-1960s onward. The poetic and the pathological recontextualizations go hand in hand. Readers of the newly published *Memoirs* will notice – as they do in reading *Life Studies* – the poet's strong visual preoccupations, his insistence on particular colors and hues, perspectives, and his meditations on seeing the world with or without his glasses. Photography and painting, in Lowell's work, do not just furnish motifs for poems, but offer incipient methodologies of how to render the observed world. None of these essays closes the discussion. Rather than advancing one steady argument about “what Lowell means” or does not mean, a volume of contextual essays will illuminate hidden corners and reveal unexpected perspectives.

At least one critic in the 1960s, Irvin Ehrenpreis, thought that “The Age of Lowell” had dawned. But the poet's reputation was not uniform in his time and certainly is not now. Part VI, **Reputation and New Contexts**, takes up the themes and categories that have become the main nuclei of critical debate on Lowell and his legacy. Its initial chapter discusses how the three volumes of his letters published in the last two decades have

changed our view of the man, his sense of humor, his character, and how they broadened our understanding of his real and imagined audiences. The chapter on his correspondence and letter writing is followed by a fresh contribution to the heated debate on the extent to which Lowell had both internalized the ideology of whiteness and recognized his complicity in it. Lowell's racial consciousness was more unstable than one might presume: In our time, the critical interest in one's self-positioning allows us a more nuanced reading of his work in this respect. Finally, the poet's conception of gender comes into sharp focus, again, in his fraught relationship with Hardwick and his unauthorized use of her words in the *Dolphin* poems. Our contributor anatomizes Lowell's infamous appropriation of Hardwick's despairing letters that she was sending him when their marriage was falling apart.

Part VI also seeks to build bridges that span the distance between Lowell's own poetic context and our moment that parses reality differently. During his lifetime, Lowell's "cooked" writing was always seen as the polar opposite of the work of the so-called raw poets (a terminological distinction Lowell coined himself): Frank O'Hara and the Beats had little patience with what the patrician Lowell published. A chapter in this section grants Lowell that he tried to escape the polar extreme of the "cooked." Another chapter demonstrates that the passage of fifty years "after" Lowell has allowed us to better identify the ways in which he has been lastingly influential. The book's concluding chapter measures the distance between the poetics Lowell has come to symbolize and "Language" and "Post-Language" poetry.

Additional Contexts

Outside the covers of this book, Lowell has also been reevaluated contextually. In *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), Gillian White describes both the practitioners and readers of lyric poetry in the postwar era – Lowell included – as managing shame arising from the recognition of the growing inadequacy and anachronism of lyric poetry. Jeffrey Meyers, in *Robert Lowell in Love* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), details the poet's tumultuous relationships with significant women in his life – his mother, his three wives, nine of his lovers, and key women writers. Nikki Skillman's *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) has shown Lowell's confessionalism to be symptomatic of the rise of the materialist understanding of the mind.

Skillman finds Lowell's lyrics expressive, in different ways, of the rise of biomedical psychology and psychiatry. In Hannah Baker Saltmarsh's *Male Poets and the Agon of the Mother* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), Lowell's work is construed as an important contribution to the tradition of mother poetry, shaped in the twentieth century also by poets such as Berryman, Ginsberg, Bidart, C. K. Williams, Hass, Komunyakaa, Plumly, and Gunn. Two international conferences resulted in volumes of critical essays: *Robert Lowell and Irish Poetry*, edited by Eve Cobain and Philip Coleman (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020), as well as *Robert Lowell in a New Century: European and American Perspectives*, edited by Thomas Austenfeld (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2019). Lowell's marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick received an extensive treatment in the first biography of Hardwick, by Cathy Curtis's in *A Splendid Intelligence: The Life of Elizabeth Hardwick* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021) as well as in a number of essays and reviews published in the wake of the two recent volumes of Hardwick's essays. Christopher Grobe, in *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), inscribes Robert Lowell's work into a much wider confessional turn that spread from confessionalism in poetry through performance arts in the 1970s and TV reality shows of the 1990s.

The creative friction generated by issues of race and gender has produced opportunities that have been readily taken up by poets of our moment. From Wanda Coleman to Olena Kaltyiak Davis, American poets have reacted with anger, amused arrogance, or sharp sarcasm to the persona that Lowell appears to project in his poetry. To them, Lowell is the exemplary privileged, entitled white male of mid-century America. Yet they find his words so compelling that they quote, paraphrase, and recontextualize them, performing a kind of *aggiornamento* that is evidence of Lowell's canonical status: He is the poet one confronts with bared teeth but also the poet one wants to sink one's teeth into. No poet has done this more powerfully than Claudia Rankine in her 2014 *Citizen, An American Lyric*.¹ Her adjective "American" articulates the need for an inclusive country of racial equality and mutually recognized full humanity. Rankine is perhaps the latest but clearly not the only African American poet to grapple with Lowell's heritage. Rankine's key form of poetic address in her poem is the second-person pronoun "you," mostly conceived in the singular, which simultaneously includes the speaker's "I" and generalizes every reader's self into the position of witness and participant. In the middle of her text, Rankine broadly alludes to some lines from

Lowell's *Life Studies* (and a few others from John Berryman's work), positioning Lowell's "I," the presumably "confessional" self, as the antipodal self-articulation of Rankine's comprehensive persona. Rankine's main interest in *Citizen* isn't Lowell; it is, rather, to articulate and expose the continual and continuing racism in American social interactions. Yet Lowell's insistent self-representation *as* exemplary of his time motivates Rankine to set him up as her rhetorical foil.

In 1993, Wanda Coleman had written a searing poem "American Sonnet (10)" expressly "after Lowell." Published in *Hand Dance*, it parodies Lowell's early style, especially "Children of Light," and is a rejoinder to Lowell's New England version of America's history foregrounding the importance of slavery.² Terrance Hayes alludes to Lowell's "Skunk Hour" in *How to Be Drawn* and evokes Lowell's sonnets in *Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, while Tiana Clark offered a complex "Gift for Robert Lowell" in *Callaloo* in 2017.³ Other women poets, such as Olena Kalaytiak Davis in *The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems*, evoke Lowell as a troubling but inescapable presence, much as Lowell himself had positioned his own oeuvre against the overly powerful modernists.⁴

White male poets on both sides of the Atlantic continue to commemorate Lowell quizzically, as evidenced by Paul Muldoon in his 2017 poem "Robert Lowell at Castletown House" and, most recently, Stephen Yenser in "Milgate House 1976."⁵ At every turn, the "stranger" we meet has "changed since then."

Notes

- 1 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).
- 2 Wanda Coleman, *Hand Dance* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1993), 199.
- 3 In 2013, during his talk at Boston University as part of the Robert Lowell Memorial Lecture Series, Hayes credited Lowell, half-jokingly, as an influence in his poem "Carpenter Ant," later published in *How to Be Drawn* (New York: Penguin, 2015); <https://amp.wbur.org/worldofideas/2013/07/14/hayes>. See also, Dan Chiasson, "The Politics and Play of Terrance Hayes," *New Yorker*, July 2, 2018. Tiana Clark, "A Gift for Robert Lowell," *Callaloo* 40, no. 2 (2017), 44–45.
- 4 Olena Kalaytiak Davis, *The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2014), 13–15.
- 5 Paul Muldoon, "Robert Lowell at Castletown House," *TLS*, September 8, 2017; Stephen Yenser, "Milgate House 1976," *New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2020.

PART I

Places

CHAPTER I

*Boston**Grzegorz Kość*

Robert Lowell's awareness of his hometown's topography is not exceptional among Bostonians. In his renowned study of the memorability of several urban locations in the United States, *The Image of the City* (1960), urban planner Kevin Lynch wrote about how all the Bostonians he had interviewed found Boston strongly imageable. Lynch discovered that the city imprinted a vivid mental map of its main elements into the minds of its residents: It has its *edges* (e.g., Charles River), *paths* (e.g., Commonwealth Avenue or Tremont Street), *nodes* (e.g., Louisburg Square or Downtown Crossing), *districts* (e.g., Beacon Hill), and *landmarks* (e.g., State House) that heighten the experience of the city's geography. This constellation of referential objects creates a spatially orienting system, giving Boston residents a good orientation and an acute awareness of the spatial context of their experiences.¹ The first stanza of Robert Lowell's "The Boston Nativity," in identifying several key elements of central Boston from a bird's-eye view, exemplifies such a picture of the city. In "Mary Winslow," too, Lowell is aware that his grandmother's death at 10 Otis Place occurred in a historic realm fringed by the Charles River Esplanade and the Boston Common. In "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," his grandfather's final moments at Phillips House, Massachusetts General Hospital, are similarly spatially contextualized. No wonder Lowell's poetic maps of Boston compelled one critic, Richard J. Fein, to use his poems as a guidebook for a sightseeing tour of "the Hub."²

But Lynch also found that members of the upper middle class usually developed a more comprehensive and stronger mental image of cities than members of the working class. The well-to-do and the wellborn are more invested in the avoidance of "lower class" sections and are more scrupulous in their scorn of districts with "'low-class' amusements."³ This class- and race-conscious urban orientation is evident in Lowell's account of his looking out south from his Back Bay house on Marlborough, onto the South End:⁴