

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 the 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 glancing 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