

Chapter & Verse

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ROBERT LOWELL (1917-77)

Trembling to Caress the Light

The American poet, Robert Lowell was born into a prominent Boston family with many notable ancestors who included politicians, poets and Calvinist theologians. Partly out of rebellion to his parents, Lowell turned his back on his Protestant heritage and converted to Catholicism but he later renounced his faith as no church could hold his contradictory nature. However, the Catholic faith had an influence in his early poems with their ornate and formal structure.

Lowell not only rebelled against his parents and his ancestors but he rebelled against the American government and was a conscientious objector in World War II. When he received his army call up papers, he wrote a humorous and ironic letter directly to President Roosevelt. He began his letter with the following words:

Dear Mr. President: I very much regret I must refuse the opportunity you offer me in your communication of August 6th 1943 for service in the armed forces.

Despite his eminent family connections, Lowell was sent to prison and spent the early months of his imprisonment in a high security penitentiary in New York. He used this experience in his poetry and in one of his poems he describes seeing a notorious murderer being led off to the electric chair.

Lowell was the embodiment of the Greek myth that genius is

closely allied to madness. Throughout his life he suffered numerous periods of manic depression and had to be forcibly removed to mental institutions for his own safety and for the safety of others. In one incident, he was believed to have tried to kill his father in a fit of manic rage by pushing him down a flight of stairs.

In his poetry, as in his life, Lowell was constantly developing and changing and in his influential collection entitled *Life Studies* published in 1959, he turned aside from his early grandiloquence to a more intimate and understated style of writing. Because he wrote poems directly about his own troubled experience, he was labelled a *confessional poet* like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath but there is a certain absurdity about placing Lowell in any school of poetry since he was in a class of his own. In a disturbing and yet deeply tender poem, he describes lying in bed with his first wife, his mania barely controlled by the antipsychotic drug *Miltown*:

Man and Wife

Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed;
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
abandoned, almost Dionysian.
At last the trees are green on Marlborough Street,
blossoms on our magnolia ignite
the morning with their murderous five day's white.
All night I've held your hand,
as if you had
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad –
its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye –
and dragged me home alive. . . . Oh my Petite,
clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve:
you were in your twenties, and I,
once hand on glass
and heart in mouth,
outdrank the Rahvs in the heat
of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet –
too boiled and shy
and poker-faced to make a pass,
while the shrill verve
of your invective scorched the traditional South.

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
Sleepless, you hold
your pillow to your hollows like a child,
your old-fashioned tirade -
loving, rapid, merciless –
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

After a second failed marriage, Lowell married an English woman in the early 1970's and they lived in Kent. It was when he returned to New York to visit his second wife that he suffered a heart attack in a taxi and died. On the year of his death, his last collection was published, entitled *Day By Day*, it contains some of his most beautiful and moving poems. In one poem he writes: *I thank God for being alive*. In a poem called *Epilogue*, he strives for a transfiguring precision beyond mere adherence to fact. He *prays for the grace of accuracy*. He comes to realize that, in the words of a fellow genius, *the facts of this world are not the end of the matter*.



Woolpit Arts Festival

I'm arranging an evening of poetry and music in the Woolpit Institute on Friday, 5th June at 7.30pm as part of the Woolpit Arts Festival.

If any member of the SPS has a favourite childhood poem which they would like to come and read on the evening, please email your poem, along with a brief explanation as to why you chose it, and I'll do my best to include it in the programme.

Email me at:

president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk

See www.woolpit-festival.com for programme details

Epilogue

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme—
 why are they no help to me now
 I want to make
 something imagined, not recalled?
 I hear the noise of my own voice:
*The painter's vision is not a lens,
 it trembles to caress the light.*
 But sometimes everything I write
 with the threadbare art of my eye
 seems a snapshot,
 lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
 heightened from life yet paralyzed by fact.
 All's misalliance.
 Yet why not say what happened?
 Pray for the grace of accuracy
 Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
 stealing like the tide across a map
 to his girl solid with yearning.
 We are poor passing facts,
 warned by that to give
 each figure in the photograph
 his living name.

Some of Lowell's most powerful and memorable poems arose out his periods in mental institutions. This extract from the ironically entitled, *Waking In The Blue* conveys an extraordinary undercurrent of menace:

from **Waking In The Blue**

In between the limits of day,
 hours and hours go by under the crew haircuts
 and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle
 of the Roman Catholic attendants.
 (There are no Mayflower
 screwballs in the Catholic Church.)

After a hearty New England breakfast,
 I weigh two hundred pounds
 this morning. Cock of the walk,
 I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
 before the metal shaving mirrors,
 and see the shaky future grow familiar
 in the pinched, indigenous faces
 of these thoroughbred mental cases,
 twice my age and half my weight.
 We are all old-timers,
 each of us holds a locked razor.