Richard Tillinghast

Robert Lowell’s *Day by Day*: “Until the wristwatch is taken from the wrist”

To read Robert Lowell’s last book, *Day by Day*, published shortly before his death in 1977, is to accompany the poet on a valedictory retrospective of his life and work. This is the most elegiac book of one of our great elegists. In poem after poem he says goodbye not only to old friends but to old ideas—the ruling ideas of the time in which he lived. He continues to feel ambivalent about the third of his troublesome marriages, wondering whether he had made a mistake in leaving his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, to marry the Anglo-Irish novelist Lady Caroline Blackwood. Ambivalence was Lowell’s characteristic stance—a stance that positioned him ideally to exemplify many of the conflicts of his period. When he died in a taxicab on the way to Hardwick’s apartment in Manhattan after a flight from London, he was carrying, wrapped in brown paper, the famous portrait of Caroline Blackwood, *Girl in Bed*, which had been painted by her first husband, Lucian Freud. In an interview in the September, 1993, issue of *Town and Country*, Blackwood reveals that attendants at the hospital had to break Lowell’s arms to remove the picture from his grasp.

*Day by Day* has the overall effect of an almost posthumous work: On the last page of Ian Hamilton’s biography of Lowell, William Empson’s words on *King Lear* are invoked:

The scapegoat who has collected all this wisdom for us is viewed at the end with a sort of hushed envy, not I think really because he has become wise but because the general human desire for experience has been so glutted in him; he has been through everything.

We that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

The use of the verb “see” in the quotation from *King Lear* turns out, as I shall make clear, to be quite relevant to this unusually visual poet’s experience. In the last section of the book he attempts to enunciate a visually based aesthetic, which is only partially substantiated in his practice. As to the length of his life: In terms of an ordinary human lifetime, Lowell was not really so old—he died at sixty. But he filled his consignment of years with more involvement, personal and public, than most people manage to do. Elizabeth Bishop chided Lowell for what she saw as a premature embrace of old age: “Please, please don’t talk about old age so much, my dear old
friend! . . . I wish Auden hadn’t gone on about it so his last years, and I hope you won’t.” From the vantage-point of his relatively early death her remarks seem unprev-
cient. Both friends had much less time than Bishop, the older of the two, could guess. She herself would die in 1979. Lowell’s premonition that his own life span would be cut off early, as his parents’ had been, turns out to have been uncannily accurate.

Far from the unseemly denial of ageing and death that many engage in, Lowell was almost in a hurry to get old and even to die. In *For the Union Dead*, written before he had reached fifty, he was ready in “The Flaw” to elegize Elizabeth Hardwick and himself:

> Old wives and husbands! Look, their gravestones wait
> in couples with the names and half the date—
> one future and one freedom. In a flash,
> I see us whiten into skeletons,
> our eager, sharpened cries, a pair of stones,
> cutting like shark-fins through the boundless wash.

Perhaps, to an extent, Lowell even romanticizes their deaths. Ten years later, on the contrary, the grim details of a hard-to-diagnose illness, rather than an appealing and idealized notion of death, recommend themselves to the poet’s attention in the poem “Day by Day.” A preternatural “seriousness,” a brutal realism, have consistently been part of this poet’s arsenal, so his accuracy in rendering the symptoms of what look like foreshadowings of his fatal heart disease should not come as a surprise. In “Our Afterlife II,” addressed to his old friend Peter Taylor, he chills us with his clarity:

> My thinking is talking to you—
> last night I fainted at dinner
> and came nearer to your sickness,
> nearer to the angels in nausea.
> The room turned upside-down,
> I was my interrupted sentence,
> a misdirection tumbled back alive
> on a low, cooling table.

Faced with the direst of eventualities, his directness, the accuracy of his words, are at the ready. The writer’s image of himself as an interrupted sentence is a humorous and lovely figure. One might well imagine how his cousin Harriet Winslow, paralyzed, an invalid for years, must have appreciated “Soft Wood,” his *For the Union Dead* poem to her, not only for its affectionate tone but for its unsentimentalized acknowledgment of her illness:

> I think of you far off in Washington,
> breathing in the heat wave
> and air-conditioning, knowing
> each drug that numbs alerts another nerve to pain.

In “Endings”—one of the many poetic farewells to family members and friends which give *Day by Day* its deep elegiac tone—Lowell, older now, relates his own symptoms to hers:

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You joked of your blackouts,
your abstractions,
comic and monumental
even for Washington.
You woke wondering why
you woke in another room,
you woke close to drowning.
Effects are without cause;
your doctors found nothing.
A month later you were paralyzed
and never unknotte... .

Because, as the last poem in the book puts it, "We are poor passing facts," we are
"warned by that to give / each figure in the photograph / his living name." The ac-
curacy of observation, the determination to do justice to fact—though it is highly
questionable how faithful Lowell was to fact even when he thought he was—can in
places give the realism of these poems a certain heroic air:

A small spark tears at my head,
a flirting of light brown specks in the sky,
explosive pinpricks,
an unaccountable lapse of time.

One's final response to Day by Day is likely to be complicated and therefore hard
to describe. A certain awe when faced with the last work of a great artist is part of
the complication. That this is the last work Lowell left, that there will never be a new
Lowell poem to read, informs part of our response, prompting us to look back over
the entire oeuvre.

These feelings of retrospective awe are complicated by a sense that many of the
poems are off-puttingly oblique. Some of them read more like notes for poems than
inspired utterances. The opening of "Phillips House Revisited," which finds Lowell
hospitalized for a heart condition in the same place his grandfather died, sounds un-
developed, jotted down in haste: "Something sinister and comforting / in this return
after forty years' arrears / to death and Phillips House . . . " Many of these writings
are willful. In some of them the logic is opaque. And then there is the suspicion that,
often, no sequential logic is intended. I am not speaking of the "difficulty" that good
poems often achieve. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the book is that the
poems' obliquity, their lack of interest in "making sense" is guided, at least ostensibly,
by a consistent aesthetic. Interestingly, this aesthetic is announced only in the last few
poems in the book. "Shifting Colors" ends with these lines:

I am too weak to strain to remember, or give
recollection the eye of a microscope. I see
horse and meadow, duck and pond,
universal consolatory
description without significance,
transcribed verbatim by my eye.

This is not the directness that catches
everything on the run and then expires—
I would write only in response to the gods, like Mallarmé who had the good fortune to find a style that made writing impossible.

Renunciation of memory, “description without significance,” then, consoles. The next stanza offers a ready example of the obliquity I mentioned above. How does this brand of description differ from “the direction that catches / everything on the run and then expires”? The next line seems to say that Lowell would always rather write only under the urging of inspiration.

Too many of the poems in this book read as if they were written just for the sake of writing. This circumstance does not, one must quickly add, exclude brilliant images, observations and lines. If the last two lines are not simply a joke not meant to be looked at too closely, do they mean that Lowell thinks he would be happier giving up poetry altogether? That strains credibility: this is a man whose existence without his writing would be impossible to imagine.

Another poem, “Grass Fires,” asserts boldly:

In the realistic memory
the memorable must be forgone;
it never matters,
except in front of the cycs.

If Lowell really believes that memorable events “must be forgone,” he would have to throw out most of what he had written. On the other hand, a poet so wholeheartedly dedicated to the new would relish the task. Still, put briefly, Lowell’s various statements on observation, memory, and the imagination are just too contradictory to form a consistent position. Is a poet required to take a consistent position? No. But this is Lowell’s most discursive book; it markedly takes positions on poetics and thus asks to be responded to intellectually.

Earlier Lowell had been bothered that students of his poems found it too easy to find “keys” to the work. He expressed reservations about Freudian readings of his work. “Maybe I throw in too much Freud,” he wrote in a letter in 1969. “I try to use him two thirds (?) skeptically and playfully. Even then [while writing Life Studies] I found his Faith harder to take straight than the Pope’s.” Yet Lowell was in therapy with a Freudian analyst for several years preceding Life Studies, and had, it seems to me, absorbed more of Freud’s point of view than he knew.

As early as 1965, in the original version of “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” which appeared in The New York Review of Books, Lowell was questioning the very notion of significance, of “great subjects,” of meaningful symbols, in his poetry:

I lie here on my bed apart,
and when I look into my heart,
I discover none of the great
subjects: death, friendship, love and hate—
only old china doorknobs, sad,
slight, useless things to calm the mad.

The china doorknob held his attention in an almost obsessive way. Almost as soon as he had put the Freudianism of Life Studies behind him, he began trying to come to

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terms with the notion that whatever attracted his eye would become the true subject of his poetry. The eye becomes the arbiter of what he will write about, the eye tyrannizes him in a way, as is clear from the For the Union Dead poem “Eye and Tooth”: “No oil / for the eye, nothing to pour / on these waters or flames.” Significantly, these lines are followed directly by his famous statement, “I am tired. Everyone’s tired of my turmoil.”

Again, in “Dolphin,” the final poem in the book of the same name, Lowell evokes sight as a way of acknowledging action: “my eyes have seen what my hand did.” The verb tenses, interestingly, have their own story to tell. Sight, for which the present perfect tense is employed, continues from the past into the present; action occurs in the past definite, and is final. Since Lowell’s “Epilogue” to the book is brief, and since it sums up his aesthetic of writing at the end of his life, I will quote it whole:

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.

This announced eschewal of plot and rhyme represents a renunciation of artificiality both in concept and style. Lowell wrote often of plot in The Dolphin, most notoriously in the line, “one man, two women, the common novel plot...” The same poem ends with words apparently quoted out of a letter from Elizabeth Hardwick: “Don’t you dare mail us the love your life denies; do you really know what you have done?” A good question; there is something heartless and dangerous about speaking of one’s own life as though it were a novel.

The sense of the poem becomes problematic almost immediately when the author announces his allegiance not to memory but to the imagination. By arguing that the painter’s vision “trembles to caress the light,” Lowell gives realism an emotional col-
oration. Then he goes on to lament that his own realism too much resembles photography and not painting—“paralyzed by fact.” It’s hard to say exactly what he means by “All’s misalliance.” I think he means, consciously or not, that he can’t make his ideas fit his practice. If, to paraphrase Yeats, we make rhetoric out of our quarrels with others, and poetry out of our quarrels with ourselves, certainly this poem arises from a quarrel with the self. “Yet why not say what happened?” he asks with a sort of exasperated shrug. It is meant, one would think, to be a rhetorical question.

But one is provoked to speak up and answer: If you just say what happened, then you lose the interest of readers who don’t find your own life as urgently fascinating as you do. Lowell’s reply in the last eight lines of the poem is that an inspired “accuracy” amounts to “grace.” Because our mortality and the brevity of our lives is in itself so poignant, then memorialization—which takes up much of this book, as well as much of Lowell’s whole oeuvre—is inherently valuable. This despite his having earlier declared in “Grass Fires” that “In the realistic memory / the memorable must be forgone.” An extreme example of poetry as just jotting down whatever comes to mind is “Wellesley Free.” The poem wanders aimlessly from the leaf-blower operating outside, to a fleeting memory of the poet’s school days, to a description of the room where he is sleeping. Then he tells us “I cannot read,” and later that “I cannot sleep solo, / I loathe age with terror” and finally trails off: “70 outside, / and almost December.” This is a poem that should have been edited out of the collection.

The uncritical embrace of writing as process, which made the unrhymed “sonnets” lose focus and almost turn their backs to their readers, became a serious problem for the poet from Notebook on. Daniel Hoffman, as friendly a reader as one can imagine, characterizes the Notebook period in these terms: “The yawning monster wouldn’t stop—he soon revised and enlarged the book, republishing the new version as Notebook, and that also to be revised, enlarged, in an endless flood of unrhymed sonnets. By 1973 the machine had disgorged several hundred poems . . .” One would hardly want to tar Robert Lowell with the brush of “poetry as therapy,” but, oddly, he was not untouched by this confusion that has put serious art and basket weaving in the same category. He had even benefitted from it: he had started writing “91 Revere Street” as a prose memoir suggested by his psychiatrist, and Life Studies poems like “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” had begun as prose. At the end of “Unwanted,” a critique of his tendency to see poetry as therapy, which I will look at in more detail later, Lowell asks an unanswerable and desperate question: “Is getting well ever an art, / or art a way to get well?”

The fusion of life and art that had been Lowell’s genius from Life Studies on apparently blinded him to something essential that goes into a poem. Good poems have enough magnetism as objects or events to engage the reader. They stand on their own without reference to the author’s biography. Lowell more and more presumed his readers’ knowledge of his life. He seems to have subsumed the act of writing so thoroughly into the personal realm that he lost the artist’s edge. An indication that writing had become simply an activity rather than a means to the end of making poems with
a life of their own, is suggested by Lowell's question to a doctor at the asylum where he was hospitalized in England:

"These days of only poems and depression—
what can I do with them?
Will they help me to notice
what I cannot bear to look at?"

If his poems are "only poems," if they are only meant to help their author, one can hardly wonder why they might lose their attraction for the reader. And then if the poet posits the supremacy of pure observation, one is much closer to understanding what is missing in Lowell's late poetry.

There are plenty of times when his confidence in his newly formulated philosophy of writing wavers. "Unwanted" is the poem that most closely resembles the Life Studies belief in psychological causality:

I read an article on a friend,
as if recognizing my obituary:
"Though his mother loved her son consumingly,
she lacked a really affectionate nature;
so he always loved what he missed."
This was John Berryman's mother, not mine.

The way Lowell follows up on this psychological clue is reminiscent of the insistent self-analysis of his most Freudian period: "Often with unadulterated joy, / Mother, we bent by the fire / rehashing Father's character." Here it is Lowell's own character getting rehashed. The difference now, though, is that Lowell analyzes his habit of self-absorbed analysis: "Alas, I can only tell my own story — / talking to myself, or reading, or writing, / or fearlessly holding back nothing from a friend."

What one can't help noticing, though, is how much of what Lowell was able to bring to Life Studies is missing even in the poems in this book that resemble the earlier book. The detailed panorama of social life, for instance—as though Lowell were an anthropologist of his own culture, noticing everything and rendering the feel of it with percepts and images, gossip anecdotes, cameo appearances, and pitch-perfect quotations from his characters. The question is not: "Yet why not say what happened?" The question is how finely, in what detail, with what humor, with how well-rendered "surround" one says what happened.

Yet this is a meaty book, informed by an acute historical sense, full of moving retrospectives, the reflections on ageing which I have already discussed, poems to old friends. Lowell's world-weary tone is earned, as suggested by the allusion to King Lear I quoted at the beginning of this essay. No one is in a better position that Robert Lowell, after a lifetime's involvement with psychiatry, to chronicle the decline in the influence of Freud's ideas: "Dreams," he comments, "they've had their vogue, / so alike in their modernist invention." In "Since 1939" Lowell even anticipates the end of Communism. The frisson of W.H. Auden's early poems forms a backdrop for the poem's insights into a curious phenomenon of our times: the obsolescence of a polit-
ical doctrine that promised the end of history, seen through the eyes of the generation who came of age in the immediate postwar period:

We missed the declaration of war,
we were on our honeymoon train west;
we leafed through the revolutionary thirties'
Poems of Auden, till our heads fell down
swaying with the comfortable
ungainly gait of obsolescence . . .

Having elsewhere defined history as that which we cannot see, Lowell labors to make visible the transition of ideas from revolutionary to outmoded: “I see another girl reading Auden’s last book. / She must be very modern, / she dissects him in the past tense.” His ironic use of the word “modern” here reinforces how difficult it is for our century, whose chief cultural movements all defined themselves under the banner of Modernism, to see itself as re-entering that elusive continuum called history. Auden “is historical now as Munich, / and grew perhaps / to love the rot of capitalism.” The poem brilliantly captures the confused sense of suspension experienced by those who have experienced and assented to the doctrines of Communism and Modernism: “In our unfinished revolutionary now, / everything seems to end and nothing to begin.”

Though capable of the insight and economy of that formulation, this poet, who has applied himself to the task of understanding history more assiduously than anyone since Pound, is clearly at a loss where to go next. So he ruminates aimlessly:

England like America has lasted
long enough to fear its past,
the habits squashed like wax,
the gay, the prosperous,
their acid of outrage.

His style fails him here. If one is going to generalize and make pronouncements, as the Augustan poets did, rhyme and meter can at least lend shapeliness and sonority to the enterprise. Lowell accomplished this in the rhyming stanza he used in Near the Ocean:

No weekends for the gods now. Wars
flicker, earth licks its open sores,
fresh breakage, fresh promotions, chance assassination, no advance.
Only man thinning out his kind
sounds through the Sabbath noon, the blind
swipe of the pruner and his knife
busy about the tree of life . . .

Perhaps I have been too vigorous in pointing out the book’s flaws, though. Day by Day contains great elegiac moments, and these are its lasting achievement. “Our Afterlife I,” the first of the two poems addressed to Peter Taylor, begins with an image of two Tennessee cardinals in migration—Taylor is a native Tennessean, and some of Lowell’s apprentice days as a poet were spent in that Southern state. Following
through on the image of the birds, the poem ends with a moment of pure elegiac transcendence:

We are things thrown in the air
alive in flight . . .
our rust the color of the chameleon.

He notes the "rust" of age and other natural processes, like the rain's "simmer of rot and renewal" and the "triangular blotch / of rot on the red roof" in a earlier poem, "Eye and Tooth," in a poem about Milgate, Caroline Blackwood's ancestral manor house. Lowell characteristically celebrates decay and decline as few other poets do: "It is a natural life. Nettles / subdue the fugitive violet's bed, / a border of thistles hedges the drive." He is also capable of startlingly original images, such as New York as a cigarette lighter:

Now the lifefluid goes
from the throwaway lighter,
it's crimson, cylindrical, translucent
glow grows pale—

From a Brazilian ex votos sent to him by Elizabeth Bishop, a primitive head meant to be offered in church as a thanks-offering, Lowell spins a touching little poem which expresses his relief at being himself again after one of his manic attacks: "Something has been taken off, / a wooden winter shadow— / goodbye nothing. I give thanks . . ." Described, it comes alive:

its shallow, chiseled ears,
cruelly healed scars lumped out
to listen to itself, perhaps, not knowing
it was made to be given up.

With the wooden head as an emblem, Lowell deftly turns the object around to himself: "This winter, I thought / I was created to be given away."

That kind of directness and clarity were too often lacking in the three books that preceded Day by Day. Of the poet's last book, a sympathetic reader would like to agree with Louis Simpson that "In his new book Day by Day . . . we are back with the fascinating, superbly gifted poet of Life Studies and For the Union Dead." Simpson's statement perhaps embodied a wish more than a certainty. Certainly Lowell had turned a corner and at the moment of death, when "the wristwatch is taken from the wrist," was on the way back to finding himself as a poet. Had he lived, it is impossible to predict what poetic self he would have found. The features of this new self would surely have taken his readers by surprise, because self-transformation was Lowell's forte. As Elizabeth Bishop wrote in her elegy on him,

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue . . . And now—you've left
for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.
At the same time he was on the way back to his second wife, who had stood by him through it all, when he was struck down by a heart attack in the taxi from the airport in New York. As Peter Taylor has written, he got the kind of death he always said he wanted: "a natural death, no teeth on the ground, no blood about the place." But, tragically, he died before he had the chance to pull off another of those startling poetic metamorphoses that made him the most innovative poet of the age.