

# Robert Lowell's Poems

A SELECTION

*edited with an introduction  
and notes by*

Jonathan Raban

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*Robert Lowell's*

A SELECTION

edited with  
an introduction and notes  
by  
JONATHAN RABAN

FABER AND FABER  
3 Queen Square  
London

*First published in 1974  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
3 Queen Square London WC1  
Printed in Great Britain by  
Latimer Trend & Company Ltd Plymouth  
All rights reserved*

*ISBN 0 571 10594 7  
(hard bound edition)*

*ISBN 0 571 10182 8  
(paper covers)*

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1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1973*  
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## *Introduction*

The poetry of Robert Lowell is as difficult, and as exciting, as any that has been written in our time. It is a proud, private, hugely ambitious body of work, and it makes no obvious concessions to its readers. Lowell challenges one to be as intelligent, as imaginatively quick, and as well-read as he is himself, and the challenge is one that few readers will be able to take up with any confidence. When Lowell writes about the twentieth century, he is likely to take us there via seventeenth-century poetry, mediaeval theology, ancient history and classical philosophy. To fix the present moment, he is prepared to range up against it all that he knows of what has been thought and done and written in the past. Yet his poems are instinct with contemporaneity; they tell us more of what it means to live, painfully and difficultly, in our century than any writer has previously dared. For Lowell has not shirked confrontation with the darkest and most personal of his own experiences: a term in jail, spells in mental hospital, marriages, loss of faith . . . he has lived as fully in the world as any writer can, and his poems report, with great honesty and intelligence, from that battlefield. As he said to Stanley Kunitz, 'It may be that some people have turned to my poems because of the very things that are wrong with me, I mean the difficulty I have with ordinary living, the impracticability, the myopia.' His vision is powerful and long-ranging, but it takes into account the ordinary failure, the flights of depression and disillusion, the puzzlement and the unhappiness of most of our lives most of the time. His poetry is written with a humility that makes it, for all its references and allusions, available—and perhaps necessary—to us all. His contemporary, Elizabeth Bishop, has said of him: 'Somehow or other, by fair means or foul, and in the middle of our worst century so far, we have produced a magnificent poet.'

Lowell himself was convinced of his own vocation. From early in his life he dedicated himself to his writing with passionate and total seriousness. He was born in 1917, into an old and powerful Boston family. There is a famous folk rhyme about Boston—

*Home of the bean and the cod  
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots  
And the Cabots talk only to God.*

Boston's second family included the nineteenth-century American poet James Russell Lowell and the experimental poet of the 1910s and 20s, Amy Lowell. Lowell has said of Amy that she was 'big and a scandal, as if Mae West were a cousin'. He went on: 'My immediate family, if you have an English equivalent, would be the Duke of Something's sixth cousins. We gave no feeling of swagger.' He was an only child, and his descriptions of his boyhood, in the poems in *Life Studies*, and in the superb prose piece, '91 Revere Street', are spiky with recollected shyness and tension—his 'fogbound solitudes' as he calls them in 'Dunbarton'. To be born a Bostonian was to inherit a fading tradition. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century the great families of New England had been the spiritual and cultural leaders of America. From Boston and its environs came the Puritan divines—Increase and Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Edward Taylor—and America's foremost nineteenth-century writers—Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne. But by the twentieth century this tradition of excellence had become little more than a memory. Lowell's own family were shabby gentry: they attended church, but as unbelievers. 'Faith was improper,' Lowell has said of them: faith, the cornerstone of New England's past, had turned, by Lowell's boyhood, into an object of mild social embarrassment. It was proper, the traditional thing, for a Boston aristocrat to go to Harvard, and Lowell matriculated there. But he was unhappy and unsuccessful as a Harvard student, and at the

end of his first year, he changed colleges and went to Kenyon University in Ohio, to study under John Crowe Ransom. It was an ideal move for a young writer. Lowell left the genteel remnants of one tradition for the confident renaissance of another. At Kenyon, the New Criticism was gathering vitality: the essays and poems of Ransom, Tate, Randall Jarrell, Yvor Winters and R. P. Blackmur were full of just the kind of imaginative verve and assurance that was so lacking in Lowell's native New England. The South had been defeated in the American Civil War, and by the 1930s, Southern writers were vigorously defining a new, purged Southern identity. Lowell came to Kenyon a pilgriming yankee ready to learn from the Southerner. He pitched a tent in the 'Tates' back garden, took dictation from Ford Madox Ford who was staying as a guest in the Tates' house, and plunged himself into an energetic reading of the classics. In a recent interview, Lowell has said:

Tate and Ransom, poets and critics, were Southerners and the line they took was that Southerners looked at the whole thing, and not just at intellect like a Yankee. If Ransom writes a poem about a man and a woman, the man is Calvinist and the woman a Southerner who knows flowers, the flesh, beauty and children. One might say that Catholicism notices things, the particular, while Calvinism studies the attenuate ideal. I have been too deep in that dogfight ever to get out.

Lowell became a Catholic convert in 1940, the year of his graduation from Kenyon, and the year of his marriage, to Jean Stafford, the Colorado novelist. It was as much a conversion to a style of sensibility, a way of thinking and feeling, as it was a conversion to a particular religious practice. As a Catholic, Lowell was dramatically able to reject the narrow intellection of New England. Later, he was to lose the faith he had won at the age of twenty-three. He said recently: 'I



don't believe, but I am a sort of gossamer, I like to read Christ's own words.'

His early poems (those selected in this edition from *Poems 1938-1949*) are absorbed in the twin problem of religion and literary tradition. Can the order of faith, or the order of metre, metaphor, rhyme, strict form, still work in a century whose contact with its historical roots grows ever more shaky? Lowell, with his education in Classics, as recommended by Tate, his ear for and grounding in seventeenth-century verse, his fresh, sensual Catholicism, holds his traditions to the modern world and waits to see which will burn first. There is a constant sense of abrasion, of incongruity, of the tug and turmoil of a man whose head is full of history but whose eyes can only pick out the contemporary urban sprawl of used-car lots and utility housing projects, and the spiritual and technological junk of the Second World War. In a *Paris Review* interview given in 1960, Lowell said of both his and Allen Tate's writing, 'We wanted our formal patterns to seem a hardship and something we couldn't rattle off easily.' It's a characteristic understatement. The language of these early poems bulges and splits with the effort of containment; the vocabulary is clotted, syntax and metre buckle under the pressure of experience. Sometimes it seems enough for a poem to be a simple catalogue of dissonances, ancient and modern flung against each other to see if some revealing symbol can be squeezed out from their odd union. The first nine lines of a sonnet called 'Concord', for instance:

*Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search  
Of a tradition. Over these dry sticks—  
The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,  
The ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch—  
The belfry of the Unitarian Church  
Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,  
How can your whited spindling arms transfix*