

NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard

A decade ago, through corrective lenses, I saw a Spanish college student on the funky Madrid subway reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with a look on his face of ravishment and radiance. I'd seen a similar look on the face of a young Englishwoman on the London Tube reading *Midnight's Children*. Probably, if I'd ridden long enough on the Paris Metro, I would've spotted a Sorbonne turtleneck absorbed in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Monneuw*, in which *colonialistes* on the Ivory Coast are described, in exquisite French, as onion-stinking Nazarene Toubabs.

You wonder what it feels like for a citizen of an imperial city to be am-



bushed by the genius of his own language, returned with spit and spin from a former colony on a far-flung continent. So does Nicholas Ostler in *EMPIRES OF THE WORD: A LANGUAGE HISTORY OF THE WORLD* (HarperCollins, \$29.95). But Ostler, with a degree in classics from Oxford and a doctorate in linguistics and Sanskrit from MIT, wonders just as much why nobody out-

side of the mother country bothers anymore to write in German or Greek; how glorious Akkadian died out to upstart Aramaic; whether Turkish, after the implosion of the Soviet empire, has a brighter future than Arabic, whose twenty-five dialects can be mutually unintelligible; and what accounts for the fact that the triumphant Mongol and Manchu conquerors of China ended up speaking Mandarin?

"Statesmen, soldiers, sailors, and missionaries, men of action, men of strong feelings have made world languages," we were told by the British linguist J. R. Firth. "They are built on blood, money, sinews, and suffering in the pursuit of power." Not always, says Ostler, even when we reference Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Sanskrit, and English in their belligerent modes. Besides "speculative commerce, naked imperialism, [and] cultural allure," migration and diffusion play important roles. So do prestige, charisma, such enabling technologies as ships, shoes, wheels, roads, horses, a radically simplified alphabet, and the ever-popular barbarian invasion. Although Ostler can't explore every "language community" since the beginning of time (Bantu and



Polynesian are omitted because they lack a written record), nor even the six thousand spoken and written today, *Empires* still covers more ram-bunctious territory than any other single volume I'm aware of, with greater wit than we've a right to expect in the service of such ambition, and a wonderful ear for the project's poetry—from Persian to Nahuatl; from clay tablets and preserved animal skins to logograms in Sumerian cuneiform and "frisky inscriptions on spindle whorls" in Gaulish; from the psalm that remembers Zion by the rivers of Babylon, a Rig Veda hymn in Sanskrit, the Sacred Tooth of Buddha, and Old Church Slavonic, all the way to the modern Greek poet Constantine Kavafis and his nostalgic longing for new ways to talk and think: "And now what will become of us without barbarians? These people were some sort of a solution."

Against the barbarians who dive-bombed the World Trade Center, Lynn Sharon Schwartz, in *THE WRITING ON THE WALL* (Counterpoint, \$24), will enlist a linguist from

the New York Public Library. Renata is walking across the Brooklyn Bridge to lower Manhattan, thinking about her boyfriend, Jack, on the September morning when the sky falls down. She is acquainted with Bliondan, a language spoken in a small area of Lapland that has a whole category of “wrong words,” called *prashmensti*. And with Etinoi, a South Seas islands language that includes the word *bakiranima*, meaning “the bad habit of clinging to past misery.” And with “uchronies,” which are “stories that imagine history taking a different course through some small but not inconceivable turn of events” —*what ifs?* And this is not to mention her Chinese calligraphy, her Outrage wall, her drowned twin sister, her crazy mother, or a child she lost on a merry-go-round. Anyway, Renata has a lot to think about even before she must take care of a little girl whose mother perished in the terrorist attack, before she invites into her apartment a teenaged mute she insists on believing is her niece, before do-gooder Jack disappoints her by being too rational about everything, and before the library asks her to learn Arabic so that she can read newspapers for her boorish government.



Writers write because they have to. So we now have many novels about 9/11 whether we want them or not. We ought to go easy on these books, as we should forgive hastily written obituaries of beloved figures suddenly snuffed; overnight, on deadline, opinions had to be potted. But we tend instead to project our own uneasiness, hysteria, or relief on the writer: he or she hasn't described the way we feel, or has softened and sanitized it up so we don't have to. Thus Ian McEwan is coddled, Jonathan Safran Foer gets kicked about like an Aztec skull, no one so far has paid enough attention to Reynolds Price's fine June novel, *The Good Priest's Son*, and you probably won't believe me when I tell you that *The Writing on the Wall* would have been excellent already without its 9/11 ballast. It is full of intuitive dread, as

if Joan Didion had written *Play It As It Lays* in the same Brooklyn boarding house where Norman Mailer was writing *Barbary Shore*.

Foreign languages and dead librarians litter almost every page of Elizabeth Kostova's very long entry in the *Da Vinci Code* sweepstakes, **THE HISTORIAN** (Little, Brown, \$25.95). Various professors and graduate students in history, anthropology, and religion run around from Oxford to Paris to Istanbul to Budapest, as well as many a Balkan monastery, turning up old books, journals, maps, and coffins. In theory, they seek to discover what ever became of the rest of the body of Vlad the Impaler after the Ottomans cut off his head in the fifteenth century.

In practice, they are pursued by Vlad in his born-again persona (Dracula, of course!) and his undead librarian minions. There is very little sex, quite a bit of torture, and I suppose we should be grateful for a narrative journey into medieval scholarship that's not about alchemy. Still, aren't vampires merely the alien abductors of an earlier system of superstitions? Even Anne Rice has given up on bloodsuckers in favor of Jesus.

Umberto Eco, on the other hand, has given up on the thirteenth century of *Baudolino*, the fourteenth of *The Name of the Rose*, the seventeenth of *The Island of the Day Before*, and all those Knights Templar in *Foucault's Pendulum* to write what might be the closest he will ever get to an autobiographical novel. In **THE MYSTERIOUS FLAME OF QUEEN LOANA** (Harcourt, \$28), shortly before his sixtieth birthday in 1991, a cultivated Milanese rare-books dealer named Yambo suffers such a peculiar stroke, “a lethargic autism,” that he forgets his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his own life, and every personal feeling attached to it; he can only recall what he's read—in many languages, of course, because this is Umberto Eco we are talking about. He

retires to his grandfather's country house, where he spent summers, holidays, and his childhood wartime years. There, in attic boxes of children's books, newspapers, movie magazines, and comics, he looks for himself in the graphic residue of popular culture. And we are looking over his shoulder all the while, at Mickey Mouse and medieval knights, *Vogue* covers and Vespa ads, *Treasure Island* and *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, fascist propaganda and Josephine Baker topless. That young Yambo was a semi-heroic Partisan is mildly startling, but we are not in the least surprised to learn at the end of this likable book that the beginning of selfhood is first love lost, for Yambo and his Paola as it was for Dante and his Beatrice.

There is no love at all in Paul Theroux's new novel, **BLINDING LIGHT** (Houghton Mifflin, \$26), only rage and role-play, blindfolds and masks. Fifty-year-old Slade Steadman is the author two decades ago of a travel book, *Trespassing*, that not only sold well enough to stay in print and supply him with royalties for the rest of his life but also spun off into a movie, a TV series, and a brand of lifestyle accessories from sunglasses and leather jackets to chronometers and luggage. Slade has since disappeared into “silence, obscurity, and remoteness” in Martha's Vineyard, where his affair with Ava, a local doctor, is coming to an end even as they board a plane for Ecuador. In the jungle, not satisfied with an *ayahuasca* high, he ups the hallucinogenic ante with “datura,” a “clone of Brugsmania” called *Methysticodendron*, which renders him temporarily blind but simultaneously telepathic. His addiction to this drug allows him to dictate his new book, a tedious sexual autobiography, and lets us think about sightless seers from Homer and Milton to Joyce and Borges, not to mention Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*. Skip the Bill Clinton psychobabble pages. Only when Slade goes really blind—when he ceases, that is, to be a tourist—will Theroux pull out all the Bach organ stops in his most powerful fiction since *The Mosquito Coast*. Carlos Castaneda turns into Dr. Faustus. n

A WORLD UNTO HIMSELF

The rewards of waiting for a debut novel

By Wyatt Mason

Discussed in this essay:

It's All Right Now, by Charles Chadwick. HarperCollins, 2005. 688 pages. \$27.95.



First novels tend to share two traits: their authors typically are young when they write them, and their enduring virtues prove scarce if we seek them. Going back to read, say, *Childhood*, Tolstoy's autobiographical debut at the age of twenty-four, is an experience that lovers of *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* cannot undertake with comparable rapture. Similarly, a frequent visitor to Yoknapatawpha County, exploring Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, will find little to suggest its twenty-

nine-year-old maker capable of an *Absalom, Absalom!* (or, for that matter, of winning a Nobel Prize). Flip through the inaugural efforts of a few, more recent titles: twenty-six-year-old Joyce Carol Oates's hyperventilatory *With Shuddering Fall*; twenty-eight-year-old Salman Rushdie's sci-fi folk yarn, *Grimus*; twenty-nine-year-old E. L. Doctorow's western-by-numbers, *Welcome to Hard Times* . . . If the lasting yield for readers of these books is surely slight, their initial importance for their authors cannot be overstated. However derivative or

deeply flawed, immature or underfered, the books were taken seriously enough to be published and, therefore, to foster a fledgling readership for their unknown authors. These young writers received a gift that few of their routinely unpublished peers will ever claim: they were offered encouragement to continue writing and developing before time and unsuccess left them too discouraged to go on.

Other novelists, however, do not have to grow up in public. Apprentice works they produce in their twenties do not find their way into print, nor do the uneven gems they discharge in their early thirties. Instead, in solitude, absent editorial encouragement,

denied the typically small but no less sustaining perks of publication (a reading here, a notice there), they nonetheless continue to burrow inward and invest further in their creations. Most of these investors yield nothing and are never heard from, an uncountable many. Some, though, with fortitude and luck, continue to confront themselves daily, second-guessing and re-drafting through the years. And then, pale and pushing middle age, they emerge from the darkness of basement apartments bearing, of all things, masterpieces in manuscript boxes—suggesting that the gift of early publication can be the most mixed of blessings.

For wasn't it worth the wait when Joseph Heller, at the ripe age of thirty-eight, came to fruition with *Catch-22*; or Ralph Ellison, nearing forty, came of age with *Invisible Man*; or William Golding, at forty-three, turned up with *Lord of the Flies*; or Walker Percy, at forty-five, at last arrived with *The Moviegoer*? However unique, each of these novels shares a maturity of form and thought that products of the young, in most every case, can only feign. What sustained their makers through the dark years? From what place did these stalwarts draw such enduring resourcefulness? James Joyce, who suffered some on the road to himself and to us, ventured an answer that tidily acknowledges the fear that every aging author, unpublished, must face down: "Youth has an end: the end is here. It will never be. You know that well. What then? Write it, damn you, write it! What else are you good for?"

At seventy-two years old, Charles Chadwick, lately of London, has found any number of things to be "good for" during the course of his life. He has worked as a hotel houseman and valet; a campground clerk and a post-office sorter; a teacher at an Indian settlement; an assistant librarian at a museum; a civil servant officiating rural regions of Zambia; a lecturer in the proper administration of such regions; an assistant director for British Council installations in Kenya and Nigeria; and a director for same in Brazil, Canada, and Poland. Since his retirement from twenty-five years of international service, he has also served as an occasional election observer in Ghana,

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Pakistan, Cameroon, South Africa, Bosnia, and Uganda. And across fifty years of weekends around the world, Chadwick has been writing fiction—an endeavor, as he said in a recent interview, that he has long viewed as equivalent to “being an amateur watercolorist.”

The fruits of this so-called amateurism are now on display. Although Chadwick has said that he had written four novels by the time he was thirty-five, as well as a fifth after he retired in 1992, it is only now—the month before Chadwick’s seventy-third birthday—that a sixth novel has become the first of his books to find its way to readers. Weighing in at almost 700 oversized pages and running to 300,000 words (*Ulysses* is 267,000 words), *It’s All Right Now* was written sporadically over the course of the last twenty-eight years, and the novel itself is a sporadic chronicle that spans those same three decades: the early 1970s through to the end of the millennium.

Chadwick’s narrator, when we first meet him, is a forty-something Englishman named Tom Ripple. A husband of seventeen years, a father of a boy and a girl, Ripple is exceptionally unexceptional. He describes himself as a dedicated reader of “thrillers and lives of the great explorers mainly”; a devoted watcher of “escapist tough stuff like *Starsky and Hutch*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Kojak*, *The Avengers* and so forth”; and a dutiful adherent to a daily lunchtime ritual involving pornographic magazines. Ripple works for “a large trading company with offices throughout the world. My job is to produce tables and charts showing trends in sales and the like. . . . My boss is younger than I am and one can almost hear him panting in his efforts to get to the top.” Ripple has no illusions about the significance of his employment: “There is nothing remotely interesting or important I could [say] about my job without lying.” His responsibilities are limited; so long as he provides his younger superior with the mutually acceptable minimum, Ripple’s job is secure:

Conveniently for both of us, I’m his willing vassal. I turn in my work on time and he’s never faulted it. He therefore thinks I’m a good chap and does not make enquiries of me that would lead

him to conclude my job is overpaid and otherwise a complete doddle. I arm him with immaculate tables and charts and other data which he passes off as his own. I am quite happy with this state of affairs. I am glad he can depend on me because I have no choice but to depend on him. The thought of having to find another job puts me into a panic. He is my protector, for as long as I serve him well. It is a feudal relationship.

As with his workplace, so, too, his home: equally ordinary, similarly stultifying. There, in a small house located in an “unnoteworthy north London suburb,” he feels himself to be at the whim of another ruling hand, one belonging to his wife. “Seen upside down,” he remarks when recalling a family picnic, “she had the look of a bearded tyrant caught in an off moment.” Her “tyrannical” reign over him, though, is hardly that of a needling sitcom harpy; rather, “she is an impossible woman to fault. She knows her own mind, is useful to the community, occupies her time gainfully, is an admirable parent, in short, God knows (she knows), is everything that I am not.” Ripple’s parenthetical “(she knows),” poking through the otherwise perfunctory portrait of Wife As Upstanding Citizen, suggests another register to Ripple’s voice. Although initially relegated to staccato asides, this more candid, more engaging slice of self will become, as the book unfolds, a defining feature of both Ripple and his book.

At the outset, though, Ripple is defined less by how he views himself than by how the world responds to him. The indifference of his children, twelve-year-old Virginia and Adrian, who is a few years younger, matters perhaps most of all; Ripple feels it every evening he returns from his work:

As I hang up my coat in the hall I shout a word or two of greeting through to the living room where my children are watching the news. I try to vary the greeting but doubt if they notice it. “Hi there!” “Hallo, chaps!” “Home again!” “Evening, folks!” are about the extent of my range. There seldom being a response, I put my head round the door and repeat myself. My children glance up, sometimes raise a hand, sometimes smile, what is known as a ghost of one. . . . If my wife is there too, she says, “Hallo, dear,” and to the children, “Say hallo to your

father.” Whereupon they say “Hi!” in chorus without looking away from the television for even a split second.

Ripple himself doesn’t know how to act around his children; even when his adolescent daughter offers a rare display of spontaneous affection, he is so uneasy with her transformation from girlhood to womanhood that he can’t allow himself to touch her: “My daughter ran over to hug me when I told her and I held her arms wide to prevent any such thing.” He is no more able to touch her than reach out to his son when, on a weekend his wife is away, the boy has difficult news he needs to share; a panicky Ripple meets the moment with an inner “Shit. Shit. Shit. Now I had to hear it.”

As brazenly as Ripple admits to his own haplessness as a parent, initially he only hints at the emptiness such incapacity has hollowed in him: “So when I look down at my children before pouring myself a glass of sweet, cheap sherry to take up to my bath, I may fleetingly regret the days when they were all over me when I came back from work, my son prodding me with a weapon and ordering me to fall about all over the place, my daughter hugging my legs and begging to be lifted up on to my shoulders.” As the book progresses, the profundity of this loss is more clearly sounded: “I sometimes think I’d like to hold him for a long time in my arms in silence, his head against my chest, as used to happen when he was very young and had come to some minor harm in body or spirit.” He notes how holidays seem to be

the only time we feel like a complete family. . . . My children have gone back to calling me Daddy, have asked my permission as well as my wife’s to do things, have cavorted about with me at the water’s edge and have occasionally held my hand when walking along the beach or wherever. . . . I see other families like us and it occurs to me we compare well with them. We have a healthy look about us. Our inner voices seem to have gone silent.

However sympathetic one might well be to the plight of a white-collar father, bored at work and estranged from wife and children, it must be said that this has become rather familiar

fictional terrain. Chadwick, for his part, has been candid about a derivative element to his enterprise. The inspiration for *It's All Right Now*, he has said, is a "wonderful book" he read while living in Nigeria in the 1970s: Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*. "I think that triggered the style. It really impressed me. It was simply about a man who wrote about his life. I thought, 'How can this be, that somebody can write a wonderful book, about a man talking about rather ordinary circumstances?'"

Although there are stylistic echoes between Chadwick's and Heller's books—compare Chadwick's "My son has stopped asking me about my work. A long time ago he stopped asking me how strong I am" with Heller's "My boy has stopped talking to me, and I don't think I can stand it. (He doesn't seem to like me.)"; or Chadwick's "Without adding (thinking?)" with Heller's "each of these women (girls?)"—they are only similarities of surface, the thinnest veneer. For Chadwick is up to something patently different from merely offering an English variation on the American theme of suburban ennui. Rather than present a character from the outside, as Updike did ("Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches..."), or allow us to snoop on the carefully calibrated stream of consciousness of Heller's Slocum (whose sentences contain allusions that seem less within the reach of a mid-range corporate executive than an erudite literary novelist: "Both our children are unhappy, each in his (or her) separate way..."), Chadwick is presenting Ripple presenting himself—with convincing transparency. For if we can never forget when reading Updike's pleasurable prose that we are mulling an aesthetic experience; or, when reading Heller's, with his humor and careful plotting, that we are enjoying a literary one; when reading *It's All Right Now*, we have the uncommon experience that we are observing the inner workings of a real, rather than a conspicuously constructed, being. Nor does Ripple appear to be a novel's narrator, or even a literary character at all. A man suspicious of, and uninterested in, literature, he has elected to sit down and write down what is unfolding in his

life, the book we have in our hands: "Well, one has to begin somewhere, on any old scrap of paper. I'm not sure what the point of it is. We shall have to see. It may take quite a time."

A question that will lurk beneath and at times bubble up from each word Ripple writes over the next three decades is, then, precisely *why* he has undertaken this project, why he "has to begin" writing at all on his present "scrap of paper" and then on the countless more to come. Ripple ventures an early answer:

It occurs to me to ask myself . . . why I have started writing about my life like this—except that I have time in the office to do it and it helps to make me look busy. I suppose I might be curious to know where it will take me and want to try some exploring of my own perhaps, not knowing what I'll find until I get there. In the meantime it gives clarity to, and saves the repetition of, all the talking to myself I do—no more or less than other people I don't suppose.

With the conspicuous innocence of Ripple's "I might be curious"; with his desire to supplement the reading of famous explorers in favor of doing "some exploring" of his own; with his claim of "not knowing what I'll find until I get there": it is nearly impossible not to feel the impulse to question his motives—and his reliability. After all, readers have learned that the history of the novel is studded with similar, seemingly offhand musings by narrators, such as those of Ford Madox Ford's Dowell in *The Good Soldier*, who posed his own "You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many..."—"reasons" the innocence of which we come to understand are *not* to be relied on: there will, we assume, be a catch. For the reader, playing the game of trying to fish for the truthfulness of the storyteller can become—in books ranging from *Lolita* in the deep end to *The Remains of the Day* in the wading pool—a significant feature of the fun: such narrators are confessing (we grow increasingly sure), but to what (we increasingly wonder)?

Nevertheless, while reading *It's All Right Now* we soon arrive at the understanding that no such game is being played: we can dispense with the effort required to distinguish the false from the true, for Ripple isn't another un-

THE POLITICS OF WAR

THE STORY OF TWO WARS WHICH ALTERED FOREVER THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC (1890-1920)

WALTER KARP

"There is an important connection between clarity of prose and political honesty, and it doesn't occur often enough for us to pass up the chance of celebrating it. I hereby celebrate Walter Karp."

—Christopher Hitchens, *Newsday*

"Eloquent, even elegiac . . . and we close [The Politics of War] with a sigh for 'that old America that was free and is now dead."

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reliable narrator, quite the opposite. He is a man striving to be more and more reliable. Shortly after we meet Ripple, his wife leaves, taking their children with her, for she cannot rely on her husband's capacities as a father. What proves moving about Ripple's shortcomings is how clearly good his intentions are, their goodness nonetheless outpaced by the badness of the encroaching world.

Ripple's manner of dealing with adversities big and small, however, is to deny them. When he senses, among a group of people, that "there was discomfort in the air," and he wishes "there was a game we could all play," he is unable to find a game, or act in any outward way, that might reduce the tension. In those instances when he does manage to take action, it is invariably in the form of humor: he relentlessly tries to joke his way past suffering. Take this routine he delivers for his daughter's "benefit":

"People have funny beliefs in Germany, some of them. I was at this party and heard this bloke next to me going on about little round red Jesus, smelly blue Jesus, smooth holy Jesus, Jesus for mice and Jesus that keeps you awake at night and cauliflower Jesus . . ."

She got it then and began to giggle which made her cry again.

Jesus, cheeses: funny, no? Well, not so much if the daughter in question is, in fact, lying in a hospital bed after a car accident that happened with her soon-to-be stepfather at the wheel. And less funny still if the reason Ripple was trying to make her giggle was not to cheer her up at all but because he predicted that, with the emotional wound from her parents' separation fresh, her father's familiar foolishness would cause her to cry—from which he would gain confirmation that she still loved him: "That's my only excuse for the greed of my love and makes me no less ashamed of it."

"Will I ever learn," Ripple wonders, "the limits of humour?" Much of the drama of *It's All Right Now* lies in the friction created by the limits of Ripple's two very different selves: the irresponsible outer self, so indefensibly and frequently glib, and the thoughtful, responsible inner self we meet on the page. As we come to appreciate

the overtures that the latter is making to us, we cannot help but feel remorse for the former's unstinting tendency to supply still more miserable grist.

In the hands of another novelist, such as a dark comedian like Martin Amis, this onslaught of harrowing material would be a forced death march that no reader could endure, yet Ripple's inner world blossoms on the page with writing that drives a reader onward. Although Ripple will not again enjoy the caring of a wife (or even the companionability of a lasting friendship), the world that opens up to him while he writes becomes a refuge. Seated at his desk, he can act appropriately by memorializing inappropriate moments lived. Quite early on, however, Ripple notes how difficult even this act can be. "The problem," he writes, "is how not to alter what happened in the light, or shadow, of what happened later":

how not to impose a pattern on it so as to feel wise after the event, get increasing satisfaction the more one writes from the composition itself, make a fiction of it in fact so that if a change occurred from the first to the third person singular you'd hardly notice the difference. By then anything goes and you don't have to worry about the real and the true, a yarn is being spun and all for the sake of the finished cloth to be fashioned at will, which isn't anything like the snagged and tattered and altogether scruffy garment you were wearing and picking nervously at at the time.

Attentive to the truth, Ripple packs his language with telling surprises. Although he remarks, while married, that he prefers his wife to talk to their children because she could get across "my point of view with complete fairness, which is remarkable since I'm not at all sure I've got one, not to speak of," Ripple's once unspoken point of view begins to resonate with all the intensity of years of rumination. His sentences are consistent, in their hoarded compression, with a man who has been silent in his home life for far too long. Of a woman he dates after his marriage ends, he writes, "She worked in banking, a teller, and how"—managing with two commas to express everything we need to know about their relationship: brief, tedious, failed. And of a night spent with a woman he meets

through the personal ads: "Someone listening in would have heard the noises of a small, unselective but contented zoo shortly after feeding time." And of his wife's and his own very different images of their maturing daughter: "I saw my daughter dressed as a nun being seized by cannibals. My wife saw her as a young woman with a dawning conscience."

As satisfactory as these lines may be, Ripple often proves unsatisfied with them. "So what is the truth?" he will write after an account of another lived debacle. "Now, some time later, I can say calmly . . ." before then going on to give us the far from calm account he "wrote at the time." When his daughter comes for a brief visit during which Ripple meets her husband-to-be and then makes a big production about lending them money, Ripple concludes his account of the visit not on a fleeting note of bitterness but on a resounding chord of sorrow after he watches her drive away: "it suddenly wasn't all right at all: my daughter traveling away from me, the things I hadn't said and didn't know how to say and never would." This would seem to say it, and yet Ripple has his doubts. "Perhaps that should come at the end," he writes. "Other things have happened since,"

but one remembers things simultaneously and brings them to a close each time in a different way as if asking: if this moment were to be my last, how would I choose to sum up? Waving goodbye to my daughter, a breath of warmth in the air at the end of winter, a patch of sunlight on a dark, unpainted wall, some bird singing alone long before daybreak—these things or things like them instead of the guilt, the failed joke, the thoughtlessness, the self-pity, the fear in the early hours of being dead. . . . No, these won't do either as last words. . . . There is far too much unraveling still to be undergone.

All these doubts about sequence and content, though, are not those of someone trying to put a story together; they belong to someone who is pulling a life apart. Ripple is not trying to spin a yarn; he is, as he says, attempting an "unraveling" of his life's knotted threads by combing through them. He may say, "I like books to have a happy ending. . . . Because life isn't like that. It's all sep-

aration and loss and everything gets taken away in the end,” but he isn’t trying to create a story that resolves a suffering past through a revisionist version (unlike the writer/protagonist of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, for instance, a novel Ripple would likely enjoy if he read novels). In his own book, Ripple refuses to provide an antidote to that separation and loss. Looking at his account’s accumulating contents, he remarks of an early, not particularly kind assessment of his wife: “Why did I make her out all those years ago to be so humourless, such a prig? Why do I not go back and cancel all that out, rewrite it with hindsight and kindness, begin all over again? Is the truth so much less important than truthfulness?” A distinction is being made here between the “truth” that is accessible through hindsight and kindness and the “truthfulness” that comes through in a moment of frustration; that Ripple finds room for both offers an answer to the question asked in many different ways throughout the book: “Why am I writing this down,” he wonders again and again, “if there’s not the slightest chance anyone else will read it and if there were I wouldn’t be writing it? For myself, then? But why shouldn’t it be enough simply to think things? It is for most people. Thoughts. Words. All vanishing alike into thin air.” Such thoughts do not vanish, however; worded and marked down they remain, and we come to appreciate their function: they measure distances between what we once thought and what we now do, a route that describes the dimensions of the world we create within us, the world that is experienced, felt, and lived.

As Ripple lives through *It’s All Right Now’s* quartet of parts—the emotional isolation of family life in part one; the literal isolation he endures alone in a small house in the Suffolk countryside, in his fifties, in part two; its perpetuation in a top-floor north London flat, in his sixties, in part three; and its continuance in his last little home by the seashore, at seventy, in part four—we live through his story with him. Ripple in his glacial change through thirty years and hundreds of thousands of words becomes fully human. We begin to believe in a Tom Ripple who is writing of his life, and

that somewhere by the English seaside where he finishes out his days he is marking it all down.

This transubstantiation of the word made flesh is a pleasingly pagan magic, one that Ripple’s humbleness puts within reach of any one of us. But perhaps it is less a matter of divination or conjury than of simple faith. In Ripple’s case it is seclusion that, in time, yields a faith in what he harvests; seen from the point of its inception, his endeavor was little more than a desperate act. He spoke to himself for want of any other listener. It was out of loneliness that he wrote, and it was out of loneliness that another border opened up, one that Montaigne crossed four centuries ago, when he advised, “We must maintain a place for ourselves alone, a free zone where we can cultivate our liberty and our peace of mind and our solitude. . . . In solitude, be a world unto yourself.”

The novelist is a creator of worlds, of course, and the commitment required to populate their continents frequently demands certain sacrifices, many of them sizable. As William Gass has noted, “It is not often one begins a sand castle on a lazy summer morning—pattybaking by the blue lagoon—only to—by gosh!—achieve—thanks to a series of sandy serendipities—an Alhambra with all its pools by afternoon.” Who knows what seaside sparked Charles Chadwick’s Ripple, or what privations were required to keep him blazing through many a weekend afternoon? It is enough for a reader to know, upon completing *It’s All Right Now*, that the world within it is alive and the life that is lived through its pages is as warm and quick as flesh. And so, as Chadwick, self-professed amateur, is bringing his three decades of creation to a close, if he allows himself a wink at the reader, a single moment when he parts the curtain on the stage behind poor Tom Ripple to tip his hat, it’s a very minor break of form:

Curiosity about living people cannot be confined within the covers of any book. Nothing can be invented. Wherever you look there is that universe of lives that can never be known. Novels are such a relief really, not that I have read many of them. People say they are an

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escape. Just so. Nothing wrong with that. Reality is there to be escaped from, or so it feels much of the time. I haven't the faintest idea how one would go about writing a novel, inventing people and imposing limits on them. Not that

it matters if it's just fiction. It's not like having to do justice to real people.

Justice, in this case, has been served. Ripple is real. n

known as "imitations," reviled by those familiar with the original texts—came bundled with the good. Nevertheless, his many passionate admirers were prepared to forgive all this and more, because he seemed to suggest that poetry could still be said to matter—not just in the context of a dull academic coterie but for all of us. As for those arcane allusions of his, weren't all bards cranky and hard to reach?

Lowell's magniloquence appeared passé by the time he died, in 1977, and his work had nothing to say to the new exponents of literary theory. But his poems and letters are now collected in two magnificent volumes, and it is possible to approach the work in the spirit in which he wrote: as a gigantic, single piece. Lowell addresses the very contemporary phenomenon of survival—whether his own madness can be overcome, to be sure, and also whether one can think of humanity outside the context of deepest pessimism. Energy lost and found, dreaded or indulged, is Lowell's great two-handed engine. The most intense Lowell moments begin bleary-eyed, myopically, with menace, as in "Waking Early Sunday Morning":

I watch a glass of water wet
with a fine fuzz of icy sweat,
silvery colors touched with sky,
serene in their neutrality—
yet if I shift, or change my mood,
I see some object made of wood,
background behind it of brown grain,
to darken it, but not to stain.

And there's usually a whiff of apocalypse with which Lowell, thanks to his own rhetorical excesses, appears somehow complicit:

orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime.

"The poem is about energy (Too much and too little, both dangerous, a sort of non-clinical manic-depressive state, resembling the world and the American national character[,] mine too[])," he explains helpfully to a Japanese scholar in a 1967 letter. Lowell's missives are filled, page by page, with awe at having survived. It is clear that, good intentions notwithstanding, we will never wholly evade what Lowell, so precise in relation to the

GRACE OF ACCURACY

Robert Lowell's revealing letters

By Nicholas Fraser

Discussed in this essay:

The Letters of Robert Lowell, edited by Saskia Hamilton. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. 852 pages. \$40.

Robert Lowell: Collected Poems, edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. 1,186 pages. \$45.



As W. H. Auden notoriously remarked, poetry makes nothing happen; but in the 1960s it was still possible to take poets seriously. Although critical orthodoxy held sway, it was contested by the Beats, for whom spontaneity in expression was a political imperative. One could encounter so-called confessional poets, those eager to use lyrical expressiveness for therapeutic purposes, and in the midst of

Nicholas Fraser is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. His last review, "Lucky Berlin," appeared in the January issue.

this landscape, dominating it, stood a work in progress called Robert Lowell.

Lowell, born in Boston in 1917, was anchored in the old culture yet seemed to be at odds with it. He read his poems badly, mumbling with a bizarre Rhett Butlerish drawl, appearing ill at ease during 1960s read-ins. He wrote about madness, and public

matters too, and he was careful to disassociate himself from those poets for whom the depiction of extreme states was in itself profound. One might dream of writing English like Lowell's, but his own, highly personal stylistic effects—trademark wild oxymorons; gorgeous, jarring clusters of adjectives; brutally end-stopped half lines—seemed calculated not just to shock but to push away. He reveled in obscure literary and personal references, spattering them throughout his work with the abandon of a Jackson Pollock. Truly bad stuff—translations

outrageousness of being alive, calls “fresh breakage”:

the blind
swipe of the pruner and his knife
busy about the tree of life

“Autobiography predominates, almost forty years of it,” he writes to his second ex-wife, the writer and editor Elizabeth Hardwick, a year before his death, in the blasé Lowell locution. “And now more journey of the soul in my new book.” The road appears endless, and pilgrim Lowell is by his own account frequently mugged along the way. He complains about the pain of writing, while admitting that he has produced too much. “Have you ever stopped writing?” he asks a friend. “It’s harder than alcohol, which I also foreswear as the very early sun crashes at about four through faults in the blinds. The trouble is I’ve become a sort of orange-squeezer expected to produce new and better juices.”

Lowell thought about his times, and he wrote about them. He was formidably learned and equally curious. Reading the Lowell letters is an experience that no one interested in twentieth-century civilization should be without. Here it is possible to develop a working knowledge of the difference between Thorazine and lithium. Here, too, one can find out about Southern Agrarianism (Lowell spent a summer living in a green tent on the lawn of the poet Allen Tate) and how good minds could in the late 1940s be claimed by the theological refinements of neo-Thomism. Those who are curious about literary politics can refresh their memory of the *Partisan Review* (it was at a drunken bash of “the Rahvs” that Lowell courted Hardwick, as he later recalled in the poem “Man and Wife”) and its displacement in the 1960s by the chic *New York Review* crowd, which Lowell came to incarnate. As a bonus there are appearances by the wonderful writers whose work Lowell loved so passionately: George Santayana, Ford Madox Ford, and Delmore Schwartz. Lowell gave up the opportunity to spend a winter in Florence so that he could peer over a dank Amsterdam canal. He made his way through Hannah Arendt, “a lot of Clarendon, a lot of North’s *Plutarch*, Macaulay’s *History*,” and, in what must have appeared

an act of conspicuous literary martyrdom, Motley’s *Rise of the Dutch Republic*. “We read continuously except when interrupted,” he explained to the poet Randall Jarrell, “then we sigh querulously ‘But I never have any time to read.’”

“I was a churlish, disloyal, romantic boy, and quite without hero-worship for my father,” Lowell says about his childhood, spent in distant proximity to his cold, selfish, squabbling, minor Boston aristocrat parents. “My real love, as Mother used to insist to all new visitors, was toy soldiers.” At his prep school, Lowell’s immense physical strength earned him the nickname Cal, though no one could be sure whether it came from Caligula or Caliban. During his yearly manic attacks (which began in early adulthood, announced by warning signals such as an itch in the neck and a tendency to calumniate his friends), Lowell gave proof of remarkable physical powers. He slipped into imitations of himself, or became a bear, or became Adolf Hitler. A small platoon was required to hold him down while injections were administered. In Buenos Aires in 1962, where he was on display with a representative of the Congress of Cultural Freedom, he climbed equestrian statues and barely slept for a week, sending cables home about American empire. Between such episodes, Lowell was vulnerable and captivating. He was married three times: to the novelist Jean Stafford, whose nose he broke in a car crash, and then rebroke, in a drunken fight; to Elizabeth Hardwick, who endured his madness for many years; and to the heiress, novelist, and journalist Caroline Blackwood.

So much excess makes Lowell attractive to biographers, but he has suffered too from his own notoriety. The letters are so valuable because they tell another story—that of unremitting hard work, Milton-style, in the service of the Muse. He rose early, illness or hangover notwithstanding, and set to work, lying on a day bed, propped up on an elbow, with papers piled on the floor, books on the bed, “the bottles of milk on the window sill,” in the words of Hardwick, “and the ashtray filled.” After “the discipline, the dedication, the

endless revision,” Lowell would write his letters. He was a typist of only moderate skill, and some early communications appear banged onto the page in panicked zeal. “You will probably think that I am very impudent and presumptuous, but I want to come to Italy and work under you and forge my way into reality,” writes the nineteen-year-old Lowell, a Harvard freshman, to Ezra Pound, and similar supplications are sent to T. S. Eliot. Converting to Catholicism in 1941, Lowell is outraged by the scale of casualties inflicted by the Allied bombing campaign. “I very much regret that I must refuse the opportunity you offer me in your communication of August 6, 1943, for service in the Armed Forces,” he writes to Franklin Roosevelt, in the style with which the well-mannered refuse onerous social engagements. Instead of serving, Lowell chose to go to prison as a conscientious objector—a move that now appears not merely courageous but prescient too.

Young Lowell seems to have been powerfully drawn to Catholicism because of an unfashionable belief in man’s fallen nature. Perhaps it made his own violence easier to bear. But he was able to shed the dogma rapidly, and this process is documented in his remarkable correspondence with the Catholic philosopher and skeptic George Santayana: “I am back where I was in my faith—fallen or standing in disillusion. Only the bull who has been burned out of a barn looks at the sunset and trembles. Often I long to walk in the great house of the Church, but the candles would set my clothes on fire long before I reached the altar.” Lowell is at his best writing half formally about those he loves, and he commemorated Santayana’s death, at the age of eighty-nine, with a fine poem evoking the philosopher’s “boyish shyness” and stubbornness:

There at the monastery hospital,
you wished those geese-girl sisters
wouldn’t bother
their heads and yours by praying for your
soul:
“There is no God and Mary is his
Mother.”

Lowell’s early work is packed with redundant allusions, cracking beneath the excess weight of accumu-

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lated artifice; much of it appears to have been written in order to be subjected to critical exegesis. By his own account, he learned to write less formally from the Beat poets, after a trip to California in which he felt upstaged. But the letters show that William Carlos Williams was just as important in the creation of the more readable Lowell. It was Williams who was able to persuade Lowell to go at the most complicated things with hope and spontaneity. "You have opened a new field," Williams wrote to Lowell in 1957, after reading in draft some of the poems finally published in *Life Studies*. "You needed that break, rhyme could not contain you any longer, you have too much to say for that . . ."

Slowly, under the influence of therapy, Lowell proves able to use his own life as primary subject matter. He begins to write not about madness itself but the aftermath—

We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

—and an identical, eerie calm is to be found in letters written from such benighted places as McLean Hospital:

The man next to me is a Harvard Law professor. One day he is all happiness, giving the plots of Trollope novels, distinguishing delicately between the philosophies of Holmes and Brandeis, reminiscing wittily about Frankfurter. But on another day, his depression blankets him. Early in the morning, I hear cooing sounds, and if I listen carefully, the words: "Oh terror, TERROR!"

Despite Lowell's status as the founder of the confessional school of poetry, there is nothing in these letters to indicate he believed that telling the truth about terrible occurrences could be in any way therapeutic. In letter after letter, he appears surprised at the coldness of his own eye. "All the late froth and delirium have blown away. One is left strangely dumb, and talking about the past is like a cat's trying to explain climbing down a ladder," he writes to the poet Elizabeth Bishop, with a clarity that one views with astonishment. "One would like to look at it all without moodiness or bravado."

It says something about Lowell's patrician manners that he continued

wearily to write apologies for his behavior, year after year. He eventually came to nurse tentative feelings of acceptance about his madness. Perhaps something was to be found by "visiting the bottom of the world." "There's a strange fact about poets of roughly our age," he notes in a letter to Theodore Roethke:

To write we seem to have to go at it with such single-minded intensity that we are always on the point of drowning. . . . I feel it's something almost unavoidable, some flaw in the motor. There must be a kind of glory to it all that people later will wonder at. I can see us all being written up in some huge book on the age. But under what title?

Lowell was never able to explain what he discovered through madness. As the attacks came regularly, he believed less and less in the beneficent consequences of mania. Surviving, and then trying to write, appears to have absorbed his energies. He was losing the battle.

It is to Bishop, who loved Lowell deeply and believed in his art, and whose low-key view of the world seems most in contrast with his own high-wire performances, that he writes most tenderly. Their correspondence, written over a period of almost thirty years, brings to life a wholly human, private Lowell, filled with solicitousness. Bishop, whose life supplied its own share of pain, found it easy to forgive Lowell his outrages. Bishop lived in Brazil; Lowell supplied her with books and reading lists, and she responded with simple descriptions of her life. In time the two styles merged. It is therefore all the more upsetting to read a letter of Lowell's to Mary McCarthy in which the details of a drunk, tranquilized, grief-stricken Bishop, falling over and breaking her arm chez Lowell after the suicide of her companion Lota, are rendered as gossip: "Pardon all this; I wouldn't write it to anyone else and know you won't spread it." Lowell's request seems somehow hollow—as if by communicating it, he expected the news to be spread. None of Bishop's replies to Lowell are reprinted here, and those who are curious about one of the most important literary relationships of that time must turn to Bishop's own giant-size

volume of letters, also published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Briefly, in the 1960s, Lowell became an anti-Kipling for Americans sickened by the overweening accents of imperial orthodoxy. He turned down invitations from Lyndon Johnson to appear at White House social events, marching instead on the Pentagon:

lovely to lock arms, to march absurdly
locked
(unlocking to keep my wet glasses from
slipping)
to see the cigarette match quaking in my
fingers . . .

The poet's anti-imperial prime is admirably captured by Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*:

He had something untouchable, all insane in its force: one felt immediately that there were any number of causes for which the man would be ready to die. . . . It was even possible that physically he was very strong—one couldn't tell at all—he might be fragile, he might have the sort of farm mechanic's strength which could manhandle the rear axle and differential of a car into the back of a pickup. But physical strength or no, his nerves were all too apparently delicate. Obviously spoiled by everyone for years, he seemed nonetheless to need the spoiling.

Lowell wasn't immune to what Mailer called "snobbery, affectations of weariness, literary logrollermanship, neutralsmanship, and whatever other fatal snob-infested baggage of the literary world." Unlike his many contemporaries, however, he was never taken in by Camelot. "We should be windows, not window-dressing," he remarked to Edmund Wilson after a visit to the Kennedy White House. "The sword hangs over us and our children, and not a voice is lifted. I thought of all the big names there, only you acted like yourself."

Lowell's struggles with violence caused him to look askance at political extremism of any kind. He discovered a degree of irony in the 1960s that was previously absent from his sensibility, and many of his descriptive missives can be set alongside the best reportage. But the puritan in Lowell was never wholly absent from his descriptions of

that time, as is apparent from this tart rendering of Jacqueline Kennedy's thirty-eighth birthday party, in 1967:

All I can remember are blood-red lamb chops, Mike Nichols next to Jackie, later, middle-aged people dancing the new dances, not very wildly, but too young for me, a slightly tawdry untimely Marie Antoinette feeling of a festival when the age for being whole-hearted about such things has passed, the flash of the jet-set, a little lurid and in bad taste in a world of poverty and blood, a certain real ease—meeting with [Robert] McNamara Jackie putting her hand over my mouth and telling me to be polite and I saying something awkward about liking him, but not his policy, then Jackie saying "how impossibly banal, you should say you adore his policy and find him impossibly dull." Few minutes talk with [William] Styron and me arguing with McNamara, no great impact on either side except that McNamara seemed a simple brilliant administrative soul, who [had] given little thought to moral complications, and who might have even taken the usual liberal line against Viet Nam more easily than I would.

For the 1969 *Notebook* sonnet cycle (later republished in 1973, revised and expanded as the immodestly titled masterpiece *History*), Lowell scoured the past in search of copy. Attila and Hitler make an appearance, as do Napoleon, Lincoln, and FDR. Lowell never quite believed that civilization was done for, and the countercultural poet is springy, amused, summery, wholly appealing. In "Life and Civilization," he glimpses a "skirt stopped half a foot above" a beautiful 1960s knee:

civilization will always outdo life,
if toleration means to bear and hurt—
that's Locke, Voltaire; the Liberal dies
for that,
bites his own lip to warm his icy tooth,
and faces all vicissitudes with calmness.
that's why there are none, that's why
we're none . . .

So favored was Lowell that he could both dedicate sonnets to Bobby Kennedy and tender advice to Eugene McCarthy. He was a vigorous contributor to the round robins of the liberal intelligentsia, writing perceptively about the impending "reign of piety and iron." His views, with their absence of tiresome ideology, have outlasted those of many contemporaries.

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"I have never been New Left, Old Left, or liberal," he writes to a friend after Diana Trilling upbraided him for taking the side of Columbia students in 1968. "I want to turn the clock back with every breath I draw, but I hope I have the courage to occasionally cry out against those who rule us, and wrongly lecture us."

Lowell's world grew darker when fellow poets Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and John Berryman died early of drink, suicide, or exhaustion. After Berryman's death, a joke, said to have originated with W. H. Auden, did the rounds: before jumping, Berryman supposedly left a note—"Your move, Cal." Rattled, Lowell made more or less doomed attempts to start over. On a 1970 trip to Britain, passion beckoned in the shape of the Anglo-Irish heiress and writer Lady Caroline Blackwood. Overnight Lowell became a rackety English squire, complaining about taxes but enjoying "winey" evenings:

Our dream has been more than life
is solid—
I touch your house, the price of the
furniture,
the two round tables big as millwheels

Lowell plundered Hardwick's letters for a sonnet cycle named *The Dolphin* (in acknowledgment of Caroline's mermaid-like, slippery beauty). He appears to have been in some doubt about publishing what was ultimately a betrayal of his ex-wife, requesting advice from friends. Bishop's response—alas, not included here, but to be found in her own collected letters—is a model of how to tell off a friend not so very gently:

Here is a quotation from dear little Hardy that I copied out years ago—before *Dolphin* . . . [was] thought of. . . . "What should certainly be protested against, in cases where there is no authorization, is the mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions. Infinite mischief would lie in that. If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact. . . ."

I'm sure my point is only too plain. Lizzie is not dead, etc.—but there is a "mixture of fact and fiction" and you have *changed*

her letters. . . . One can use one's life as material—one does, anyway—but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them . . . etc. But *art just isn't worth that much*.

Lowell was sheepish, half-appalled by the critical obloquy heaped on his head, and upset by family photos published in *Newsweek*. Perhaps Bishop was right: art wasn't worth that much. *The Dolphin* appears horribly dated now, and not merely because of its maladroit annexation of poor Hardwick's letters. Lowell wasn't that engaged by his own glassily observed divorce, and his feeble attempts to declare his guilt ring false.

Sadly, even the birth of a son didn't halt Lowell's downward drift, and his letters, though still graced by wit, become pain-filled, rambling monologues. (Those written to Lady Caroline were lost, appropriately enough, in a robbery of her London apartment; only the fragments copied out by his biographer, Ian Hamilton, remain.) Lowell couldn't decide whether to stay in Ireland, to which Blackwood had moved for tax reasons, or return to New York. To the alarm of friends, he began to act aged, forgetting things and dressing down, though he did this with appropriate style. Near the end he appears to have decided that he wouldn't live long:

You start in the morning, and look up to see the windows darkening. . . . The world you've been saved from grasps you roughly. Even sleep and dreams do this. I have no answer. I think the ambition of art, the feeding on one's soul, memory, mind, etc. gives a mixture of glory and exhaustion. I think in the end, there is no end, the thread frays rather than is cut, or if it is cut suddenly, it usually hurtlingly frays along the way. No perfected end, but a lot of meat and drink along the way.

Lowell died of heart failure in 1977, at the age of sixty, in a yellow cab on his way from JFK airport to his ex-wife's flat on the Upper West Side. He was carrying a portrait of Lady Caroline by Lucian Freud wrapped in brown paper. "If the balcony breaks, a big part of literary New York will disappear," Bishop was heard to say at the reception after the Boston funeral.

Not everything that Lowell wrote remains readable, but with great pain, working on the most seemingly trivial of materials, he found an idiosyncratic, insistent voice still capable of speaking intelligently on our behalf. As he got closer to death, he wrote more simply. The last poems of *Day by Day* (1977) have been criticized for their flat descriptiveness but nonetheless appear to be among his greatest achievements. Lowell may indeed have experienced a sense of flagging powers, as the letters attest, but the deceptively simple snapshots, "lurid, rapid, garish, grouped," rendered with "the threadbare art of my eye," represent a triumph not just in relation to the materials of art but over the hellishness of his own life too:

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.

Lowell had spent a lifetime trying to understand how the most complicated experiences could be transformed into poetry, and by now one can hear the sound of nails being frantically banged into wood behind each phrase. "I cannot go down to the sea," he says in his very last, saddest farewell note to his family and the world. But his eye is characteristically drawn still to a half-destroyed remnant of a pier at the Lowell summer home in Castine, Maine:

I think of my son and daughter,
and three stepdaughters
on far out ledges
washed by the dreaded clock-clock of
the waves . . .
gradually rotting the bulwark where I
stand.
Their father's unmotherly touch
trembles on a loosened rail.

Reading Lowell is a way of reminding oneself about mortality—how much that is modern, and once seemed so secure, has already vanished. Recently, I spent a nine-hour overnight flight to Beijing in the company of Milton's Satan:

The mind is its own place, and in itself

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REVIEWS

Continued from page 96

Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of
Heav'n.

Lowell, I recalled, updated Milton
frequently, visiting Lycidas for death by
water in his first ambitious poem, "The
Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," and
adapting Milton's haunted, paranoid,
poetic persona to his own Agonistes.
But he never drew more aptly from his
Puritan begetter than in the suburban
darkness of his 1959 masterpiece,
"Skunk Hour":

I myself am hell;
Nobody's here—

Robert Lowell wrote brutally about
the way in which nothing can be said
to last, and any neglect of his work
would not have surprised him. The
publication of these superb letters is a
grandiose, appropriately Lowellesque
act of cultural defiance. So long as any-
one cares enough about Lowell to keep
him in print, so long as somebody's
there to read him with the kind of pas-
sion he himself devoted to the poems,
all is not lost. n

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