Book Review: Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character

Jean Marie Carey


In a certain way, Robert Lowell (1917-1977), widely acclaimed in his lifetime as the curator of his mania and thus its commander, seems a superb subject for Kay Redfield Jamison (1946-), the psychologist, academic, and author who chronicled the mastery of her own mental illness in *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1997). Given Jamison’s background (though a psychologist, Jamison is on the psychiatry faculty of Johns Hopkins University), it seems natural to inquire about the importance of a documentary of a fellow sufferer in terms of her professional stake, which includes the widely-disputed claim that bipolar disorder is a result of immutable inheritance. Psychology of course owes an educational debt to the study of individual pathologies explored in depth. But rather than the case study as a model, Jamison deploys the historical narrative. This is not necessarily a terrible tactic as there is something repellent about using a clinical eye to evaluate the intimate revelations of people, especially those who do not submit themselves for treatment or diagnosis.

What can Robert Lowell, *Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* tell us, then?
Jamison’s “research question,” partially answered by the book, seems to be:

What is madness? Is it beyond one’s control or not? What is character? How does madness figure into work, into art and imagination? Is art worth the pain it causes? How does a marriage of strong wills and intellects sustain madness and infidelity? (117)

…but naturally there are some very open ends, especially with respect to “character.” Lowell’s cinematic demise at 70, in a Manhattan taxi cab on his way to see his former wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, in the midst of the collapse of his third marriage, to Caroline Blackwood, has – like the deaths of many poets – somewhat eclipsed his body of writings, which both parallel and precede the patrician New England examinations of John Updike.

Lowell drew inspiration from his Boston upbringing, combining metered with free verse, mythology with confession, and earning early accolades for Land of Unlikeness (1944) and Lord Weary’s Castle (1946). Lowell was one of the first post-World War II public intellectuals, having protested that war and the war in Vietnam, teaching at Harvard and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, helping found the New York Review of Books, and making a bridge between conventional literary publishing and the “raw” poetry of his friend (and critic) Randall Jarrell and the Beats. These accomplishments are worth noting at the top because although they become lost in the minutiae of Lowell’s illness as chronicled by Jamison.

The book is arranged in six main Roman numered sections – an Introduction, followed by “Origins,” “Illness,” “Character,” “Illness and Art” and “Mortality” with subheadings using the poet’s words, for example “Flight Without a Ledge” (97) and “Life Blown Towards Evening” (323). More than 150 pages are devoted to substantive endnotes as well as Lowell’s full psychiatric records and a sort of literature review of diagnostic criteria and nomenclature regarding mania and depression. Despite this wealth of data, Jamison, who has made few forays into literary criticism or cultural writing, is not inoculated against not fully understanding Lowell’s milieu and the context in which some of the many cited letters or (many fewer quoted) poems were written.

Describing the sort of anti-“Byzantium” “Revenants” as a direct recitation of Lowell’s connection to his Mayflower ancestors, Jamison seems to miss its connection to the larger canon of poetry devoted to the topics of aging and mortality:

They come back sometimes, I know they do
freed like felons on the first of May,
if there’s a healthy bite in the south wind,
Spring the echo of God’s single day.
They sun like earthworms on the puddly mall,
they are better equipped for everything than people
except perhaps for living. When I meet them
The therapeutic value of Lowell’s poetry is also far from straightforward. Yet Lowell’s and Jamison’s need for constant high-level achievement, for the attainment of an ideal, is evident on every page even though their perfectionism in and of itself is not construed as its own torment. Lowell’s real professional success and the sense of completion his marriage to Hardwick brought seemed, for periods of time, at least, to provide some sort of counterbalance to these feelings of unfinishedness. Jamison makes great use of Hardwick’s meticulous, trenchant prose:

Hardwick’s description of mania, and the pernicious effect it has on those flailing, drowning in its wake, are among the best I know. She is astute and direct in her account of being married to someone with manic illness, of being married to a famous poet with manic illness. Madness is easy to overdramatize and thereby underestimate; it is less easy to convey its capacity to erode identity, disfigure love, and violate trust. The real horror of madness is more subtle and corrosive than its caricature. (117)

Indeed, when Hardwick finally writes to mutual Lowell family friend, the journalist and left-wing activist Blair Clark: “I do not want [Lowell] back under any circumstances” we are relieved for and with her. (336)

The important, 40-year correspondence between Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, however, is given short shrift and I could not help but feel this was because Bishop did not fit easily into the various “wronged women” scenarios that punctuate Lowell’s relationships as construed by Jamison. Casting Lowell’s three wives – Jean Stafford, Hardwick, and Caroline Blackwood – and daughter Harriet into these roles, an understanding of Lowell’s emotional life emerges that reduces these complicated, educated, erudite women to less-than subjects.

Jamison does give splendid insight into the manic aspect of Lowell’s psychology. Undoubtedly Lowell wrestled with personal demonic forces, which emerged as common ground in life and work. Like Jamison he seemed never to fear the death of his imaginative powers, and yet, finally, perhaps there is something about chronic madness that so fascinates readers and researchers alike precisely because it is so difficult to characterize. In the end, both psychologist and poet resort to the most common of metaphors:

Lowell … was left to piece together his mind which had been shattered. The “whole thing,” he said, “was like a prolonged bad dream.” (105)

Jamison’s volume is an interesting read in its own way, and with many of Lowell’s papers preserved in public repositories, including well-organized archives at the University of Texas and the New York Public Library, perhaps this biography – the first major work on Lowell’s legacy this decade – will spur a renewed interest in him. Intent on demonstrating how Lowell overcame his manic episodes to thrive as a poet, Jamison’s valorizing premise rejects the notion laid out so simply in other interpretive biographical studies (Peter Schaffer’s Amadeus (1979), for example): that sometimes the troubled and brilliantly gifted are also
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