

Reading by Fractions: Some of Robert Lowell's Sonnets

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The so-called ethical criticism that has flourished in the last twenty-five years or so has often looked to literature for thick descriptions of human predicaments, thoughts and feelings. Critics and philosophers such as Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum have typically been drawn to well-established canonical texts, particularly in the tradition of the realist novel, that seem to be representative of broad if not universal concerns. A writer like Henry James may be extremely rare, but what is most valuable about him is seen to be his exceptional ability to express the details of situations that are objectively *there*, and that are common to humanity in general. But this is not the way in which literature always works, and not the way in which people always think of it. A lot of literature does not seem particularly general; it seems personal. It seems to be animated by distinctive personalities and ways of seeing. It does not necessarily seem to want to be of service. It may advertise its own strangeness – its otherness – and seem to discourage the thought that we can hope to see things just as the author does, or that it would help us if we could. It is these odd, alien, subjective, egotistical, private, evasive, and uncooperative aspects of literature that sometimes make it hard for literary critics and theorists to defend what they do, at least to others whose expertise lies in fields that are more obviously relevant to everyone's lives. But there is really no need for this defensiveness. Even the oddest literature can do things that we all really need.

In this paper I shall offer a close reading of some texts which raise the matter of whether literature should or can be something collective, how it balances the

personal and the public – and thus what kinds of usefulness in human affairs, what kind of ethics, it might lend itself to – in a variety of powerful ways. The texts in question are some sonnets by Robert Lowell, which may seem to be a rather equivocal gift to the reading public, being apparently autobiographical and yet only obliquely informative. They are self-consciously the products of a wry and rather haughty mind, and they are generally quite hard work.

Arguably the leading figure among the ‘confessional’ American poets of the 50s, 60s and 70s, Lowell was famously upper-class in background. He made a name for himself as a troubled, egotistical genius, making difficult poetry out of a difficult life, exploiting both himself and others; but he was also reckoned to speak for his time, and for America.

Lowell is not quite as popular, right now, as he was twenty or thirty years ago, despite the recent publication of a *Collected Poems* and an edition of his *Letters*. His later work, in particular, is often regarded as rather unsuccessful, not least because it seems self-obsessed and uncommunicative. If you know just a few of his poems, the chances are that they are from *Life Studies* or *For the Union Dead* – from 1959 and 1964, respectively. However, there is a great deal of later material, especially hundreds of rather loose exercises in that ancient and exacting form, the sonnet. These were published and re-published, revised, added to, and repeatedly re-arranged in a cluster of volumes between 1969 and 1973. Sometimes he seems to have thought of the whole corpus of sonnets as one vast poem, both autobiography and grand survey of the world that he lived in; at other times, he tried to group the poems in sub-sections, thematically, or according to the particular people on whose living presences they were based. The boundaries kept changing. The poems that I have chosen to focus upon in this essay are the first ones in the slim volume, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, which, at least according to the title, represents Lowell’s effort to mark

out the texts describing, devoted to, of interest to, or otherwise ‘for’ his ex-wife (the second of three) and his daughter (his first child, born when he was nearly 40).

‘For Lizzie and Harriet’, say the cover and title page. Really? For those two people? Why were these poems published, then, by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and by Faber and Faber? Why have we got them here, in front of us, now? Who indeed is (this) literature for? How are we to place it, in terms of personal and collective experiences and discourses?

Here is the first poem:

1. *Harriet, born January 4, 1957*

Half a year, then a year and a half, then
ten and a half – the pathos of a child’s fractions, turn-
ing up each summer. Her God a seaslug, God a queen
with forty servants, God – you gave up ... things whirl
In the chainsaw bite of whatever squares
the universe by name and number. For
the hundredth time, we slice the fog, and round
the village with our headlights on the ground,
like the first philosopher Thales who thought all things water,
and fell in a well ... trying to find a car
key ... It can’t be here, and so it must be there
behind the next crook in the road or growth
of fog – there blinded by our feeble beams,
a face, clock-white, still friendly to the earth
(Lowell 1973, 13).

One thing that this poem does is raise questions about reality and fantasy. On the one hand we have an actual date; on the other we have God as a seaslug. Is it about the

way things really are at all? It might seem, for a while, that Lowell places the fantastical in the realm of the child, and that the adult world is constructed as enlightened and rational by contrast. But that does not really hold up when we reach the experienced third person plural of the seventh line – a plural that has the possibility of including us readers – and find that we are all going around in a fog.

The poem raises the issue of philosophical knowledge, epistemology, through the allusion to Thales, who was indeed a pre-Socratic who thought that all matter was ultimately water-based. But Lowell takes us immediately from water to a well – ‘poetic justice’ as they say – and from Thales’s thinking to an anecdote about his life. The source is Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where Socrates says that Thales fell into the well because, in his head-in-the-clouds philosophical way, he was staring at the stars. There is no indication that the accident was fatal, and the plural subject of the poem survives too, as we see, to contemplate another celestial body in the last line. Now, this may seem like a peculiarly ‘literary’ or arty and rather vulgar way of looking at philosophy. But real philosophers sometimes think about one another in similar ways. If you have seen the film about Jacques Derrida that was released in 2002 you may remember him jokingly comparing himself with Thales when he nearly comes a cropper, crossing a road. Elsewhere in that film, he says that what he would most like to know about the philosophers of the past is more about their sex lives.

There is an interest in knowledge in Lowell’s poem, knowledge for example of the nature of Divinity, and of the poet’s – and ‘our’ – place in a cosmological perspective; for we have the universe in the middle of the poem, and the earth at the end of it. And there seems also to be a slightly teasing awareness of the immediate epistemological dilemmas of the reader trying to make some sense of this difficult text – for, of course, we too are looking for a key: a key to the door of the little room

which is the poem. But insofar as knowledge is represented by Thales, then we are looking at a kind of epistemology that is not just wrong – everything is not actually based on water – but somehow contaminated by accident and anecdote. Lowell, like Derrida, seems to suggest that it may be undesirable or impossible to separate the search for meaning from the idiosyncrasies of personal history and character, or from the wider system of discourse that contains both Thales’s philosophy and his vulnerable and chancy life.

The poem as a whole seems oddly discontinuous, divided into fractions like the child’s life in the first few lines, or bitten and sliced in what, for Lowell, are the characteristically violent terms that follow. There is a general concern with ordering, categorising and quantifying, but, in the end, it doesn’t add up, and what we are left with is not a solution but a moment of transcendence or the sublime where the previous concerns – for example, as to where the key might be – do not really matter. Like Thales, we look up into the heavens, and there we see a countenance, which must be the moon’s, which puts us in perspective, underlines our feebleness as people, philosophers, would-be infant theologians. It is indulgent and unreproachful, and yet this moon is also a clock: as if to say, you have done your best, but your time is nearly up.

I cannot help being reminded, when I read the end of Lowell’s sonnet, of a much more canonical poem from the same period, Philip Larkin’s ‘High Windows’. This too is a poem that starts with the young, goes through a portrait, of sorts, of the middle-aged poet, and ends in sudden transcendence. More precisely, Larkin starts by staring with lascivious envy at the new, supposedly carefree, youth of the sexual revolution, and then this happens:

[...] I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,

And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless
(1974, 17).

Larkin sent Lowell a copy of the collection, itself called *High Windows*, in which the poem appeared. Lowell wrote back to Larkin promptly. 'I like the title poem best', he says; 'all the poetry is in the last lines, these would count for little without the others'. He goes on to compare the godless Larkin to the Metaphysical poet-priest George Herbert, thinking perhaps of the gaze up to the 'high windows' themselves, which sound church-like even if they have nothing beyond them, and ends with a little joke, acknowledging the two of them as two late-middle-aged men, with their much expressed fear of physical decline exacerbated by the black comedy of artistic ambition: 'I am writing short poems about being 57', says Lowell; 'when I started, it was 56. I didn't know how lucky I was. Age, the best of subjects – it's amazing this statement can give any pleasure' (2005, 630).

So, Lowell thinks that Larkin's last lines 'contain all the poetry', but 'would count for little' without the lines that precede them. This seems a pretty good delayed

and displaced judgement of Lowell's own poem, where the final appeal to the moon, about as 'poetical' a gesture, in a traditional sense, as one can imagine, has to be earned by the aborted remembering, seeking and philosophising that it follows and somehow cancels out. You have to have the junk of life to have the joy of suddenly rocketing up away from it. You have to try to think things through in order to feel the pleasure of relaxing and accepting, however wistfully, your ignorance.

This, you might say, is not much of a contribution to philosophy, be it ethics, epistemology, or any other kind. If anything, it is more like a reflection on how to live with the philosophical impulse, and that includes letting it go. But perhaps philosophy needs that kind of insight into its own situatedness, or life in the world. Moreover, there are other things in Lowell's little poem that we have not yet touched on, and that perhaps represent stronger, more specific claims to philosophical significance, although to bring this out I am going to have to gradually go through the whole sequence of five poems, and, before that, I need to say something about what seems to me to be a very general, and very urgent, set of moral problems.

People, on the whole, are morally innumerate. When it comes to a crisis, we cannot add up. We have all no doubt noticed something of this kind when we have picked up a newspaper, or watched the news, and have noted that a specific child lost in Portugal gets far more column inches and airtime, not only than all the other lost children in the world put together, but also far more than the hundreds, thousands or even hundreds of thousands killed in the wars and natural disasters that happen to be going on at the same time; not to mention the million or so annual road-deaths; not to mention the banal and repetitious ravages (but new and acute if it happens to be you) of deadly disease. Just lately, partly in the wake of 9/11, partly as a side-effect of the calculating mentality imposed on us by climate change, and partly, just through the slow pressing onwards of the consequences of a intermittently reason-based society,

more and more philosophers have been looking at this nexus of ethics and number. Two examples of this tendency, extremely different from one another in many ways, would be Peter Singer and Slavoj Žižek.

Both of these philosophers took the risk, soon after 9/11, of saying that the reaction to this event, whatever its specific attributes of shock, cruelty and monstrosity, was disproportionate. If we gave that amount of attention to every three thousand lives that end in horror, our traumatic work would never end. The same thinking, with its roots firmly in nineteenth-century Utilitarianism, is at work in Singer's recent book, *The Life You Can Save*, in which he points out that we should be exactly as quick to save the life of an invisible child, starving thousands of miles away, as that of one knocked over in the road in front of us, and that we should accordingly start giving away a lot of our income. For Singer, it is logically clear what we should do. We just need to gather the facts, do the sums, and follow their consequences. At the same time, he is moderate. In answer to interviewers' questions, he says that he gives away 30% of his own income. He could afford more, he admits; he is not a saint. While it is easy to admire the 30% contribution, which no doubt does correspond to quite a lot of real saved lives, it is hard to avoid the disturbing thought of the further lives that would be saved by another 10%, even 1%. This does not seem to be an overwhelming problem for Singer, although there is nothing in his logic to show why it should not be. Just to give you a sense of where I am going with this, it seems to me that the fuzzy line in Singer's thinking between, on the one hand, collective consequentialist rigour and, on the other, the individual's untheorised claim to the enjoyment of a moderate portion of his private good luck has got something in common with the pathos that Lowell sees in his child's fractions, 'turn / -ing up each summer', and with his uneasy insight into 'whatever squares / the universe by name

and number'. 'Squaring', as well as a mathematical operation or the drawing of a grid, is an act of justice, paying debts and making something fair. Does Singer really show us how to do that?

Žižek, on the other hand, has no wish to be moderate. He argues that the only authentic and adequate way to react to the violence that terrifies us, the violence exemplified by terrorism as such, is to commit ourselves to a different kind of violence, tearing down, as he says, the socio-economic wall, 'chang[ing] society so that people will no longer desperately try to escape their own world' (2008, 88). Žižek would presumably see Singer's expanded philanthropy just as he sees that of Bill Gates: as a mechanism through which the exploitative system entrenches itself even more, as if violence and immiseration were side-effects that the system can re-absorb and compensate for, not, as Žižek believes, constitutive features of the system. Like Singer, Žižek accuses us of not seeing the wood for the trees – emphasising specific atrocities or outbreaks of suffering at the expense of abuses on a much larger scale that fall beneath our radar. But Žižek does not believe that much good can be done by fractional, calculated adjustments; the change has to be immoderate and immeasurable.

Literature can help with these matters; and, in fact, that we cannot do without it. This is because literature places itself at the interface between individual and collective experience. Just one person writes a poem, usually, but there is no limit to how many eventually may read it. A character in a novel seems to be an individual, going about his or her private concerns, and indeed we may value literary characters for their seeming originality or uniqueness, and yet the novel becomes a classic, which, for some reason, it is important that everyone should read. Lowell's collection

of poems is ‘for’ and about ‘Lizzie and Harriet’ and yet somehow it is for us, too, so that the interests of the one and the many suddenly meet each other, faces to face.

If the closing lines of Lowell’s sonnet seem to anticipate Larkin, its opening ones may echo another poetical warhorse from the English tradition: ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. Now that this thought has occurred to me, I cannot read ‘Half a year, then a year and a half, then / ten and a half’ without half-hearing the beginning of Tennyson’s brief chronicle of military incompetence and stoicism:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred
(2007, 508–09).

Lowell’s head was crammed full of other people’s poems: his contemporaries’ and his predecessors’. And, as a mortal, poor Harriet is ultimately heading in the same direction as Tennyson’s doomed cavalymen. Aren’t we all?

It is an interesting question whether Tennyson means his ‘six hundred’ to sound like a few or a lot – again our collective problems with moral arithmetic make it hard to say which would be the more tragic way of looking at it – but, in any case, it is a finite number, and thus a kind of metonym of finite humanity, in contrast to the infinitely expandable big D of death. Harriet’s half-years are a similar metonym, emphasising how short her life so far has been, but also how short her whole life will be; and reminding us that there are always two clocks running, the one that measures individual lives, such as those of poets and the real people that they write about, and the one that keeps track of general humanity, with its indefinite duration: the level on

which the phenomenon of literature, and general concepts such as death, are bigger than anyone who lives to experience them.

One more diversion before we really get back on the road. Tennyson's predecessor in the laureateship, William Wordsworth, was also haunted by numbers, and by the relationship between the singular, the quantifiable and the infinite. A poet very much in thrall to an idea of himself – hence, for example, Keats's famous diagnosis of Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime' – he nevertheless wished to connect with the masses. According to his 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth set out to explore the deepest human concerns through plain characters and plain speech, his 'principal object ... was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature' (1992, 743). Widely admired as these poems have always been, people have often laughed at their attempts to combine profound feelings and abstract thought with a kind of pedantic literalness. But sometimes the impact of these different elements seems to be the real point of the poem. In 'We Are Seven', for example, the eight-year-old who is questioned by Wordsworth's speaker amazes him by persistently claiming that she is one of seven siblings, although, as it turns out, two have moved to far-off Conway, two have gone to sea, and two are lying in the church-yard (underground). 'How many are you then,' asks the speaker, for the fourth time,

'If they two are in Heaven?'
The little Maiden did reply,
'O Master! we are seven.'

'But they are dead; those two are dead!
'Their spirits are in heaven!'

'Twas throwing words away; for still
 The little Maid would have her will,
 And said, 'Nay, we are seven!'
 (Wordsworth 1992, 75).

There is a certain in-built pathos in any finite number: Why are 'the Seven Stars no more than seven[?]' asks the Fool in *King Lear*. 'Because they are not eight!' (1.5.33–35). But there is an extra pathos here in the mismatch between the little girl's maintenance of her dead siblings as whole numbers in the local census and the speaker's implication that they are zeroes, absolutely nothing whatsoever. Now, perhaps Wordsworth's aim is to show that this is the way an unfinished mind works, the mind of a child. But it is a key theme in the Wordsworthian ideology that we are the more to be pitied the further we drift from childlike ways of seeing. This may partly explain what is perhaps the most commonly mocked passage in *The Lyrical Ballads* as a whole. This is in 'The Thorn', a poem about a woman who haunts a thornbush and a little pond beside it, up in the hills, and who may, it is feared, have drowned her baby in the pond, or hanged it on the bush. The thorn, the speaker tells us, is 'five yards from the mountain-path',

And to the left, three yards beyond,
 You see a little muddy pond
 Of water, never dry;
 I've measured it from side to side:
 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide
 (1992, 78).

The speaker in 'The Thorn' is easy to identify with the speaker of 'We are Seven'. He is a bit obtuse; he does not fully understand what he sees or what so-called simple people tell him; he gets bogged down in numbers. But he is also like the child. Her unchanging roll-call of brothers and sisters is her touching resistance to the fact of their death, a truth which is of no use to her; his measurements keep him occupied, and keep what must from a Wordsworthian point of view be the ultimate and absolute negation of infanticide at bay. So, we *have* to be stupid with numbers, Wordsworth may be saying; don't expect, or even hope, to get beyond it.

All of which is to say that Lowell's daughter's pathetic fractions, half and one-and-a-half and so on, have a long literary history behind them, and a long future ahead, insofar as literature seems bound to come back, by virtue of its own constitutive confrontations of personal and general kinds of significance, to real problems that we have – whether it be as philosophers or just as thinking people – with making it all add up.

Here is the second sonnet in Lowell's sequence:

2. *Harriet*

A repeating fly, blueback, thumbthick – so gross,
 it seems apocalyptic in our house –
 whams back and forth across the nursery bed
 manned by a madhouse of stuffed animals,
 not one a fighter. It is like a plane
 dusting apple orchards or Arabs on the screen –
 one of the mighty ... one of the helpless. It
 bumbles and bumps its brow on this and that,
 making a short, unhealthy life the shorter.
 I kill it, and another instant's added
 to the horrifying mortmain of

ephemera: keys, drift, sea-urchin shells,
you packrat off with joy ... a dead fly swept
under the carpet, wrinkling to fulfilment
(1973, 13).

Where actually *is* Harriet in this poem? We shall come back to that.

Meanwhile, Lowell's speaker makes connections of a sort with other life-forms: the fly, but also people on TV, the 'Arabs on the screen', who – given that this was written in 1967 – are Egyptians and their allies being bombed by Israel. A curious system of alternating might and helplessness is set up between the fly, like a fighter plane (as well as a crop-duster), the stuffed animals (who are not fighters, so cannot intercept the fly), the on-screen antagonists of the Six Day War, not to mention the speaker of the poem, beset, poor man, by the disturbing interference of the fly and of traumatic news bulletins, who nevertheless turns out to be not just a fighter but a killer, not one of the helpless but one of the mighty ... and yet immediately one of the helpless again, a pathetic, rueful figure, staring at a heap of desolation. The poet, as we are made to imagine him through this poem and its companions, is something of a bully and a loudmouth, but also ineffective. His attempts at exerting control rebound upon him.

Once again, other poems are in there, giving Lowell's sonnet some of its life. Flies have quite a history in literature, and the lord of them in American poetry is probably the one described by Emily Dickinson, that slightly witch-like fairy godmother of Lowell's 'confessional' school:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

[...]

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –
(1998, 587).

A century before Larkin, Dickinson soars above her windows: it is the light that fails, not she. And yet, a century before Lowell, she too finds her composure upset by a buzzing insect. Dickinson is a lot cooler than Lowell, however. Lowell praises her in a letter as somehow ‘superior to publication’, thinking perhaps of his own excessive rush to print (2005, 324). And perhaps we are meant remember her kind of negative capability, leaving herself unassignable, the fly ‘uncertain’, when we are made to see Lowell seeing himself irritably reaching after whatever it is that he uses as a swatter.

Flies are not so far from fleas, and I feel that we are also being buzzed by John Donne’s insect (Donne, and the Metaphysical poets in general, were favourites of Lowell’s). In Donne’s poem of that name, the flea is part of a peculiar love triangle: it bites the poet, and it bites his mistress – who is imagined sitting there, listening.

Since their blood is mingled already in the flea they are as good as married, so why not go to bed? The mistress says nothing in the poem; the only words are the poet-speaker's, a stream of would-be seductive witticisms; but then she intervenes, not speaking, but stabbing: 'Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since / Purpled thy naile in blood of innocence?' (1965, 53). Lowell, you could say, is partly trying to use the device of the fly to chat up his muse of the moment, his daughter. The poem is supposed to be for her, after all. But he self-destructively kills the fly and saves her the trouble. And, in a way, that makes it worse. Donne's mistress is provoked into insecticide by her paramour's otherwise unstoppable ego-driven seduction routine; Harriet could reasonably be even more impatient with a father who dedicates a poem to her, tries to recall a scene from her childhood, but gets side-tracked by his main metaphor which he then devotes all his energies to hunting down and killing, so that she herself doesn't even appear until the penultimate line: 'you packrat off with joy'. Of course she does. Like Donne's mistress, she has had enough of all this bombast; she has places to be, life to be lived.

Lowell certainly has a problem with household pests; first the fly, now his daughter proves to be a rat. It's an odd word, 'packrat'. The *OED* has this very instance as only the second example of its use as a verb. The first is from Jack Kerouac, who writes in a letter of 1955 of 'Buddhist bums in Japan packratting up to 10,000 feet for weeks at a time, to meditate & pray & cook & boil tea' (1995, 529). Harriet was still only ten when Lowell wrote this, but, as the last poem in the series shows, that is already uncomfortably close to adolescence. She will soon be packratting for real: the exuberant gathering of essentials of one who is about to clear out and take to the road. Meanwhile, Father is left with that other odd word, 'mortmain', which is also a gathering, but of quite a different kind: the involuntary accumulations of a life that's running down.

It may be worth pointing out that the relationship between this textual father and textual daughter will not have been the whole story. Lowell is being selective in the way that he invites us to imagine his relationship with Harriet, in order to make artistic and philosophical points. His letters suggest other dimensions, and kinds of devotion. A few days after Harriet's birth he writes that the baby looks 'more like Dylan Thomas than say, Audrey Hepburn' (2005, 268), but it doesn't sound as though he would have it any other way. He is particularly gushing in letters to female writers. In February 1957 he writes to Elizabeth Bishop: 'I'm really mad about my little daughter and feel as though I had been up to now lacking some prime faculty: eyesight, hearing[,] reason' (2005, 270). Later in the same year he writes to Flannery O'Connor: 'We adore our little baby and fortunately have a nurse [...] to do the dreary work' (302). He mentions the nurse a lot, as though reassuring and congratulating himself that Harriet is not going to be too much of a drain on his time. But the affection is clear enough, too.

The point of this is to underline that Harriet Lowell is a person with an existence independent of the poems that have her name placed, as subject or dedicatee, above them. Texts are texts and people are people. But Lowell knew that our knowledge that Harriet is a real person would be present to us as we read the poems. Lowell got himself into hot water, at various times, with various children, wives, lovers, friends and colleagues, for giving away too much, even if it was nominally 'for' them, in their name. But what is really the nature of this dirty linen, at least for those of us who don't and never will have any direct and personal knowledge of the people involved? Are we being shown Harriet, or (even more intimate) her father's idea of her, or is it – perhaps still worse – that she is a pretext. What matters is not Robert Lowell telling us what he thinks about his daughter Harriet, but the enactment of a generic or ideal Father/poet talking about his

Muse/daughter. We don't know, we can't know, where to draw the line between these possibilities. That in itself is part of the workings of the poem, and of literature in general.

Should we be afraid of becoming fixed in a gaze, a reading, of a person or a poem? Yes, but we can't help it. This is what Derek Attridge calls the 'singularity of literature', in his book of that title. Literature comes into being as an 'event' of reading and interpretation, carrying responsibility and thus involving an ethics (in this respect Attridge follows on from Levinas and Derrida). Then the text falls back into inertness before it is reborn, and becomes literature again, when a new reader picks it up – or the same reader on a different occasion – and a new singular position is taken. This is a wonderful process, in Attridge's view, and I agree with him; but it has a touch of pathos about it, too. Every new reading is a testament to the nominally infinite possibilities of the text, but every reading is also an exclusion of the infinite in favour of that which we can formulate now, and explain to ourselves, and get down on paper, or convey to an audience. And we only have so much time. Perhaps we cannot achieve the abstract fairness that seems to underlie the equalising logic of Peter Singer's philanthropic philosophy; not that we shouldn't try to help, but we may have to acknowledge that we are also, inevitably, killers. Killers, because we will never save as many lives as we, in principle, could; or because we are condemned to cut bits out of poems, and people, even our family, in order to make them fit into the discursive situations in which we find ourselves.

I am going to be brief about the third sonnet. Here it is:

3. *Elizabeth*

An unaccustomed ripeness in the wood;
 move but an inch and moldy splinters fall
 in sawdust from the walls' aluminium-paint,

once loud and fresh, now aged to weathered wood.
 Squalls of the seagull's exaggerated outcry
 dim out in the fog. ... *Pace, pace*. All day our words
 were rusty fish-hooks – wormwood ... Dear Heart's-Ease,
 we rest from all discussion, drinking, smoking,
 pills for high blood, three pairs of glasses – soaking
 in the sweat of our hard-earned supremacy,
 offering a child our leathery love. We're fifty,
 and free! Young, tottering on the dizzying brink
 of discretion once, you wanted nothing,
 but to be old, do nothing, type and think
 (Lowell 1973, 14).

This poem seems like a pause and a breathing space after previous ones: an 'unaccustomed ripeness' indeed after the 'exaggerated outcry' of the skirmish with the fly. We are also given some useful information. If 'We're fifty', then as Lowell knows most readers of the poem will know, it is 1967, and Harriet is 10. Her parents (Elizabeth and Robert) have been squabbling all day – that is why their 'words / were ... fish-hooks' – and now they give it a rest under the tranquilising influence of alcohol, cigarettes, medicine, incipient decrepitude, and perhaps even Harriet, whose name may be present here again, stretched out into 'Heart's-Ease'. But the poem is not without its puzzles. Who exactly is the 'you' at the end? Elizabeth, who is the nominal addressee, or Lowell (it wouldn't be the first time that he talked to himself), or indeed the reader, who is hereby sucked in as one of the family? A dubious privilege, perhaps.

Given the irregularity of the rhythm in these rather lax sonnets, the seagull could be crying ‘*Pace, pace*’ (rhymes with face). That could seem appropriate: pace as in speed, as in pressure, as in time pushing us on, to fifty and beyond. And I don’t know that ‘pace, pace’ (rhymes with face) sounds less like a seagull than ‘pace, pace’ (Italian). But it is italicised, and *pace* as in peace is what ought to follow the outcry. And yet, if it is ‘Pace, pace’ (Italian), then Google points us to Verdi’s *La forza del destino*, in which the heroine’s famous final aria ‘Pace, pace, mio Dio! / Cruda sventura / m’astringe, ahimé, a languir’, is followed by her murder, as destiny catches up with her. Lowell seems tempted to see his marital difficulties as high opera, but probably knows, as well, that he’s being a bit of a prima donna.

The end of the sonnet seems more straightforwardly ironic. Younger versions of Robert and Elizabeth may well have liked the idea of having more time, later on, to write and think. Despite Harriet, thanks to her nurse, perhaps they do now have that time, but of course they have become ‘leathery’ in the meantime and would love to get back to that other kind of freedom, before the age of discretion. Lowell was very interested in the question of whether writing and thinking actually was ‘do[ing] nothing’. In the Second World War he had been through the activist pacificism of being a conscientious objector, and had been imprisoned for it; in 1965 he sent a public letter to President Johnson protesting at the war in Vietnam, and saying, ‘I know it is hard for the responsible man to act; it is also painful for the private and irresolute man to dare criticism’ (1987, 371). So, there is a queasiness in him, about opting out. On the other hand he might have thought of Wordsworth who, again in *The Lyrical Ballads*, recommends what he calls ‘a wise passiveness’ (‘Expostulation and Reply’), where the poet is enjoined to be still and let nature speak to him. Elsewhere in Romantic poetry, in Coleridge for example, this notion finds its perfect metaphor in the Aeolian harp, a string instrument that is hung in a tree, requires no

further human agency, and makes music when the wind touches it ... which takes us to the wind and music of Lowell's fourth sonnet:

4. *These Winds* (Harriet)

I see these winds, these are the tops of trees,
 these are no heavier than green alder bushes;
 touched by a light wind, they begin to mingle
 and race for instability – too high placed
 to stoop to the strife of the brush, these are the winds. ...
 Downstairs, you correct notes at the upright piano,
 twice upright this midday Sunday torn from the whole
 green cloth of summer; your room was once the laundry,
 the loose tap beats time, you hammer the formidable
 chords of *The Nocturne*, your second composition.
 Since you first began to bawl and crawl
 from the unbreakable lawn to this sheltered room, how often
 winds have crossed the wind of inspiration –
 in these too, the unreliable touch of the all
 (1973, 14).

I have not been able to find anything out, beyond the poem itself, about the daughter's precocious musical career. But here, even if she is an object of pride, she is also a discordance. We are up in the tree-tops in a blessed zone of Romantic passive inspiration in the first five lines of the poem, but then something intrudes, like the fly of the second poem, but this time it is the daughter herself, out of sight and half out of mind, bracketed in the very title of the poem, whose piano composition is surely not quite what it ought to be. Should a nocturne have 'formidable / chords'? In

any case, they shouldn't be hammered: that suggests, in the words of the last line, an 'unreliable touch'.

Throughout these poems there is a simultaneous gesturing towards closeness with the nearest and dearest represented within them, and a pushing away. Harriet, in this sonnet, both is and is not identifiable with her father. Her music suggests his poems: composition runs in the family, and Lowell was well aware that he could be as heavy handed as anyone. On the other hand, the first few lines are like a preemptive strike, saying, here is a kind of in-tuneness with the poetry of nature the like of which you'll never be able to manage. Harriet bawls and crawls and this racket 'crosse[s] the wind of [her father's] inspiration', but the winds that cross this wind are also surely Lowell's own psychic bad weather – bipolar as he was, in and out of hospital on a regular basis, really the very model of Romantic torment, dangerous to himself and others, as Harriet will be said to be, at the end of the last poem. And, in this poem, too, ten-year-old Harriet is already touched by the imagery of her father's mental illness, as though it were part of her: that, as well as any parent's fear that a child will harm herself, is why she moves from an 'unbreakable lawn' to a 'sheltered room', and, for that matter, why, in the second poem, she has 'a madhouse of stuffed animals'.

It is as though Lowell were asking: Are my daughter and I really part of one another or not? Is she a chip off the old block or an intruding stranger? And again, this has something to do with questions that we readers may ask ourselves, with this poetry more than with most: Is this for me, or not? Where do we draw the line between the public and the personal in this or any literature? How does the singular, epistemologically and ethically, relate to the collective? In 'the unreliable touch of the all', at the end of the poem, we hear perhaps a touch of unreliability in the very

concept of the all. This all is not exactly the almighty, just as the clock-faced moon in the first poem was no substitute for God, be He or She a seaslug or whatever; this ‘all’ is more like Hamlet’s questioning of the ‘common’. ‘Thou know’st ’tis common’, says his mother: ‘all that lives must die’. ‘Ay, madam, it is common.’ ‘If it be / Why seems it so particular with thee?’ To which Hamlet has an answer, but not really a satisfactory one, not one that he can actually reveal, for he has ‘that within which passes show’ (1.2.72–85). Or, to skip to a later scene in the same play, ‘What’s Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?’ (2.2.553–54). What’s Harriet to Lowell? What’s Lowell to the reader? What is this strange world in which we generate responsibilities, within ourselves, to the characters in our stories about ourselves, whether or not they make it into literature?

And now, the last sonnet in the series:

5. Harriet

Spring moved to summer – the rude cold rain
hurries the ambitious, flowers and youth;
our flash-tones crackle for an hour, and then
we too follow nature, imperceptibly
change our mouse-brown to white lion’s mane,
thin white fading to a freckled, knuckled skull,
bronzed by decay, by many, many suns. ...
Child of ten, three quarters animal,
three years from Juliet, half Juliet,
already ripened for the night on stage –
beautiful petals, what shall we hope for,
knowing one choice not two is all you’re given,
health beyond the measure, dangerous
to yourself, more dangerous to others?

(Lowell 1973, 15).

Clearly this is about the grand old poetical subject of Mortality, yet again. But again there are particular ambiguities about the reach of the poem, whom it embraces or ensnares. The third persons plural in the third, fourth and eleventh lines can be either exclusive or inclusive: a family matter of two warring, worried parents, or the detached body of mature and disenchanting humans, including all foreseeable readers, and going back to Shakespeare and beyond. The hour in which our ‘flash-tones ... crackle’ is both a literal hour of squabbling between Robert and Elizabeth (perhaps a bit like Section II of *The Waste Land*), and, through the inevitable associative sequence of ‘flash-tones’–‘flesh-tones’–‘flesh’, the hour of our collective death and judgement, as the human race, when our flesh crackles in the final fire (think of the ‘Apocalyptic’ fly in the second poem). To put it another way, the hour is both an hour on the clock and an hour on the time scale of Macbeth’s ‘poor player’, the generic human who ‘struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more’ (5.5.24–26). So, we have the same sort of disorienting metonymic logic, here, that we have seen in the previous poems, and the same overriding questions: What is the scale, the measure? Is this about individuals or types? Which level of interaction or conceptualisation really matters?

According to the American philosopher Alphonso Lingis,

Words order our action: they organize our environment by segmenting it and demarcating paths and instrumental connections and by invoking possibilities and predicting consequences. [...]

Numbers disconnected from anything but one another – 1, 2, 100, 1,000, 1,000,000 – can function as an organizing method. Numbers are the preeminent means of military organization for aggressive wars of indefinite expansion, for example, those of the great khans who thundered across the steppes of central Asia over the centuries. Levying ten men from each village,

a hundred from each town or each clan, constitutes an army. [...] At the end of a raid or battle, losses will be expressed in numbers: we lost a hundred; the enemy lost five hundred.

Numbering and arithmetic organize multinational corporations whose production is diversified and whose assembly plants are located where labor and transportation costs are cheapest. They can organize individuals who determine what to major in in college on the basis of accessibility and salaries of various occupations, what percentage of their salaries to spend on the purchase of a house, what percentage for the education of their children, how many children to have, when to retire, and where to spend the rest of their days (2007, 28).

By way of contrast to this modality of thought, Lingis includes photographs in his book, photographs of real people whom he has met in his travels throughout the world. There is no commentary on the photographs, but Lingis clearly means them to represent a force of personality, strangeness, singularity and/or otherness that does not conform to regular quantification. The book is called *The First Person Singular*. Every single sentence in the book is declarative, and thus a sort of imaging of singularity. That is to say that, like a lot of good philosophy, it is distinctly literary: its form is part of its content; its style part of its meaning. Some professional literature people do not like to use the term 'literary' in this way; they fear that it diminishes the status of literature *per se*, defined for the sake of argument as high quality poems, plays and prose fiction. But although I wouldn't swap Shakespeare, or even Lowell, for anything, I think that there's everything to be gained by recognising the literary as a modality of discourse, and even of consciousness, that reaches far beyond any particular genres. This is not to jeopardise literature but to give it its due, as something that is there in the human condition, or even constitutive of it.

At the beginning of his Lowell's sequence of poems, he talks about the pathos of a child's arithmetic, her fractions. As he proceeds through the sequence he problematises the differences between himself and that child, questioning his ability

and even his desire to speak for or about her. Now, at the end of the sequence, we have another fit of numerical chopping and changing:

Child of ten, three quarters animal,
 three years from Juliet, half Juliet,
 [...] one choice not two is all you're given,

Lowell, as he presents himself, does not know how to count his daughter, how to account for her; not even, really, how much of this 'packrat' is human, or whether she is still on the way to being Shakespeare's thirteen-year-old Juliet, or there already. The 'child's fractions' are not a way of seeing that we can grow out of. The adult's fractions are there, too. This is why what could seem a rather cold series of poems for a man to write about his child has a certain intimacy after all, because father and daughter have a kind of interchangeability. But we mustn't be too sentimental; for all we know, Harriet has no time for Robert's ramblings; and the poems know that we know that. We are never really allowed to settle into that kind of universalist view.

A funny thing about literature is that you can adore an author, even devote much of your life to understanding what he or she was trying to say, and explaining it to others, and it is entirely possible that the author in question, had they been alive and able to meet you, would have thought you an idiot. Again, we face the question of whom literature is for. It is another dimension of the way literature marks the zone in which we negotiate between privacy and publicity, selfishness and altruism, the common interest (or what F. R. Leavis idealistically called the 'common pursuit' of literary criticism) and what Žižek calls 'the abyss of the infinity that pertains to a subject' (2008, 38).

However, one thing that I seem to have been trying to do in this essay, and that I imagine myself continuing to do, is exploring the role that literature can play in

ethical games of numbers, whether it be in relation to war and body counts, or bioethics, or the logical philanthropy of Peter Singer. It is not that I expect literature to tell us exactly whom to care about more or less than anybody else, or that we should care about everybody equally. What literature can do instead – and I mean literature as the domain of the literary, not least in philosophical writing – is help us to realise how far from straightforward our relationships to one another are, be it ourselves, our children, or humanity in the abstract. That is worthwhile in itself, if we really want to understand how hard it is to be consistently and rationally ethical. But, more than that, I think that we will find that all of the arguments that we may make for particular values and policies and actions must themselves, at some point, partake of the literary, because they start from the impossible situation in which we all find ourselves, stuck on the boundary between the notional objective world – the deduction or extrapolation that we for good practical reasons tend to call the real world – and the world actually present in our heads. The literary is just as inseparable from the human condition, therefore, as law or politics or even genetics; to question its place in society, or in the university, is a bit like questioning whether we still need people.

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